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BROWNING'S HIEROGLYPHIC: THE EMBLEM  
TRADITION AND POETIC VISION IN THE  
POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING.

City University of New York, Ph.D., 1976  
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ADRIENNE MUNICH

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BROWNING'S HIEROGLYPHIC:  
THE EMBLEM TRADITION AND POETIC VISION  
IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

by

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## Abstract

BROWNING'S HIEROGLYPHIC:  
THE EMBLEM TRADITION AND POETIC VISION  
IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BROWNING

by

Adrienne Munich

Advisers: Professors John Hollander and Wendell Stacy Johnson

From his first work, Pauline, to Asolando, at the end of his career, Robert Browning's poetry and his poetic can be placed in a tradition of emblematic thought. Emblems, allegorical pictures with a versified interpretation, supposedly originated with a notion that Egyptian hieroglyphics were a secret, occult language needing a hierophant to translate its spiritual meaning to a group of initiates. One writer, Francis Quarles, survived the seventeenth-century vogue for emblematic poems to become a favorite in many Victorian homes, particularly among dissenting church groups.

In his early years, Browning knew Quarles by heart. Paracelsus, Browning's first "historical" hero, is a failed hierophant of the hieroglyphics of nature. He prophesies the coming of one (Browning himself) who will redeem his failure by combining scientific knowing (facts) with visionary loving (fancies). The emblem is a

literary artifice which embodies these two qualities; it combines a picture, the "fact" with a poem, the "fancy." The hierophant can use this device to convey news of a spiritual sort to the happy few.

Browning's poems are filled with images portraying his ambivalent attitude towards this band of judges and receivers of his words.

Throughout his career, Browning adapts the emblematic model to fit his poetic voices. His dramatic monologues brilliantly bring the emblematic portrait within the compass of human activities. In one monologue, "Cleon," Browning draws an emblematic portrait of an artist and at the same time articulates his ars poetica. His complex work, The Ring and the Book, is partly a demonstration of how the emblems of the ring and the book are capable of generating an enormous spiritual exercise and of revealing a new truth. Towards the end of his career, in Ferishtah's Fancies, the dervish, Ferishtah/ Browning displays his emblematic repast in a series of fables. Finally, in the Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day, his poetic autobiography, Browning narrows the audience to seven representations as he becomes the hierophant of the book of his own life and interprets a final version of his emblematic philosophy.

This study grew out of an original interest in the pictorial quality of Browning's imagery. Originally, I had distinguished between the "pictorial" images, those which directly evoked a picture, and "emblematic" images in which the image itself stood on the horizon between the earthly and the spiritual. As far as the larger question of Browning's poetic is concerned, his pictorial imagery is part of his general desire to find a way of incorporating the other arts, particularly music and painting, into his poems. This ambition is a basis for Browning's bid for immortality, a yearning which he somewhat antithetically conveys in his portrait of the artist in "Cleon," a poem which will be examined in chapter three.

It became clear, however, that Browning's pictorial sense, even when invoking specific paintings, was part of and not opposed to what this study defines as Browning's emblematic point of view. I have termed that viewpoint Browning's "hieroglyphic," the title of this study. The concept of hieroglyphic includes his characteristic images, his way of moving from image to image by a process of analogy, and his inclusion of a persona who resembles an amalgam of hierophant, prophet, and artist to convey the meaning of the image. The title not only implies that the difficulties of deciphering his works have made them unavailable to the many, but also suggests that some of these difficulties are inherent in his poetic vision, a vision which was not meant to be democratic.

To begin with origins, the emblematic element of Browning's poetic can be understood by considering the way in which the poet inherited the emblem tradition. How Browning learned about emblems and how he began to use them is the subject of chapter one. Through fanciful genealogy, emblem books traced their ancestry to Egyptian hieroglyphics, supposedly a code whose meaning was available only to a group of initiates. The idea of a secret picture language which both was more recognizable than the words as represented by the alphabet and yet was indecipherable has been an appealing notion for centuries. (It explains, for example, some of the attraction of Pound for the Chinese ideogram and perhaps his admiration for Browning as well.) Ideas of the occult nature of hieroglyphics can be found in the Renaissance and again were looked upon with particular interest by German Romantics and by some English poets, such as Coleridge and Shelley.

Browning may have responded to an interest in the idea of hieroglyphics and the occult connotations of its private languages on the part of some Romantic poets. His great familiarity with emblematic thinking, however, probably came to him from his parents. Robert Browning, the father, was a bibliophile whose emblem books were young Robert's picture books. His mother probably approved of the way emblem books could instruct children in Christian morality.

In some sense, Browning's hieroglyphic is part of a larger tradition in which the world is viewed emblematically. By reconstructing that traditional framework to fit his poetic vision, Browning

participates in this larger world view. Emphasis in much critical writing upon the "unique" aspects of Victorian poetry and upon Browning's "invention" of his characteristic form, the "Browning" dramatic monologue, has tended to obscure his connection to this poetic tradition. By focusing upon the emblem tradition in Browning, one notices a quality which extends well beyond those poems which are explicitly "dramatic" in conception and beyond a particular form. Thus, his work can be considered as a whole. Browning's use of emblems and the philosophy which they imply extends to specific images and characters in the poetry, to a governing concept of language in art, and ultimately to a vision of reality. By exploring this more general question while focusing upon the methodology of emblems, I hope to suggest a wider range for Browning studies than has usually been considered.

The word "emblem" has been used in a very broad sense to signify an image representing a larger reality. I have attempted to avoid too diffuse a meaning by defining "emblem" and "emblematic" to apply only when certain requirements have been met. By limiting its meaning specifically to emblems as they are found in the emblem books of the seventeenth century, I define the emblem tradition in Browning in three ways: the type of image, the interpretation of the image and the interpreter of the emblematic configuration, or "hieroglyph."

In regard to the image itself, a hieroglyph is, first of all, an

ordinary object, an artifact, such as a ring or a book; a natural thing, such as a flower or a star; an art object, such as a statue or a bust. It usually does not in itself appear to be remarkable. Part of its attraction, particularly for Browning, lies in its utter factuality. Ordinary people would be unable to recognize the eternal message which the object transmits.

To one who has a larger vision, however, the ordinary object or "fact" has great power to tell about great matters. The object as hieroglyph brings news of a spiritual reality and is the starting point of a meditation, almost of a spiritual exercise. It carries a message of the beyond and begins to "figure forth" a higher truth. In this sense, the emblem guards the boundaries of a dualistic universe as part of a world view which distinguishes between body and soul. Browning suggests this duality in his characteristic opposition between "fact" and "fancy," an opposition which is considered in chapter four. The terms of emblem literature embody the concept of dualism in its form, such as its early practitioners Whitney and Wither point out, by splitting into separate modalities of picture and poem. The picture was thought of as the "body" because it represented the object as the eyes of sense would take it in. The poem was conceived of as the soul because it represented the object as the eyes of visionary understanding would know it. For seventeenth-century emblem writers, particularly Quarles, this knowledge was Christian in orientation and vigorously moralistic in execution. This Christian aspect of the

emblem tradition was one way for Browning to reconcile his own unorthodox Christianity to the main Romantic tradition.

In addition to these two aspects of the image itself, its concreteness and its spiritual message, Browning uses the concept of the hierophant, a chosen messenger who delivers the otherwise mysterious meaning to a select group of initiates, his audience. Browning was interested in this special personage as a type. His play, Man-soor the Hierophant, later called The Return of the Druses, features a mis-guided but nonetheless sincere deliverer of his people. Paracelsus is another failed hierophant who attempts to convey his message to a group of unfaithful initiates. The idea of a "chosen" one has diabolical as well as celestial implications in Browning's characteristically dualistic frame. The chosen one can be transformed into an insane or an evil character, as in "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" or in "Mr. Sludge, the Medium." Browning presents versions of this prophet, priest, and hierophant and appears himself in The Ring and the Book as a reader of two hieroglyphs, the ring and the book. Browning thought of the artist as hierophant who deciphers the hidden language of emblems, delivers them to the people, and thereby receives his authentication as a genuine visionary. This figure as a type interprets the hieroglyphs in Browning's Book of Human Nature. He appears in various guises in each chapter of this study.

The first chapter views Browning as hierophant of the emblem tradition, primarily in terms of his early work, Pauline, Paracelsus,

and some lyrics and early monologues from the Bells and Pomegranates series. Since the group who receives the message of this prophetic voice is necessary to complete the mission of the hierophant, the second chapter investigates the relationship between audience, hierophant, and message as it develops in Browning's poems from the first appearance of the image in Pauline to a final view of it in the Parleyings. Browning was haunted by a consciousness of an audience. Not only did he insist upon writing plays in the face of apparent failure, but he incorporated the concept of audience into his characteristic form, the dramatic monologue. In that form, the role of the listener, an audience of one, subtly adds to the shape of the emblematic portrait of the speaker, a correct interpretation of which is often aided by emblematic objects.

Since the audience validates the claim of the hierophant if it accepts his vision, conversely it threatens the would-be prophet with its power of rejecting him. Consequently, the crowd can seem variously threatening or admiring. Browning's wish to bring more than just words before this jury who decides whether or not he is authentic further complicates his self-portrait as artist. If he is going to achieve his goal to be counted among those few readers of the emblem book of the world, he feels that his message must have some attribute which distinguishes it from all others, both past and future. He bases his bid for immortality on his comprehension of all arts. He first enters this claim in Pauline and then continues throughout his career

to experiment with various techniques to bring other arts within the boundaries of his poetry.

In "Cleon," Browning depicted an artist who claims to be master of all arts. The analysis of this monologue stands at the center of this study as it is central to the three aspects of the emblem tradition in Browning. Cleon, the pan-artist, distinguishes himself from the artists of the glorious past by surpassing in breadth what his forebearers achieved in their respective single arts. Furthermore, not only does Cleon assume the credentials of a fully evolved artist, not unlike the claim of his creator, but Browning embellishes the portrait of this artist with hieroglyphs. He thus illustrates in form what he states in content. This poem is also important because it combines an aesthetic with a religious theme. Unlike the Romantic poets of the previous generation and even unlike most Victorians, Browning included an explicitly religious element in his poetry. His poems with religious themes bear the weight of a concern, although in an idiosyncratic way, with the problematic nature of religious belief. Although they express unorthodox points of view and are not uniformly sympathetic creatures, the list of Browning's dramatis personae includes many religious figures. Bishop Bloughram, Rabbi ben Ezra, Saul, Saint John, Caponsacchi, and the Pope bespeak a concern with religious matter which escapes the fervency of Christina Rossetti or the tormented dogmatism of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet who unwittingly learned a great deal from Browning.

The emblem tradition served to reconcile the disparate and apparently troublesome aspects of Browning's ambitions and of his vision. The combination of more than one artistic province has already been suggested. Moreover, the study of emblem books taught an essentially allegorical style in which the concrete objects take on a private meaning. Understanding comes to the reader by means of a special relationship between his own receptivity and the ability of the poet to deliver the message. Hence, the figure of artist as emblematiser accords nicely with the private revelations prized by Evangelical Christianity. Since delivery of the word is essential for this mode of communication, I have devoted a great deal of attention in this study to the various guises in which this magician of words is presented. He is the reader and deliverer of Browning's message, and I consider his appearance as prophet, painter, politician, bishop, dervish, and many other forms as essentially protean transformations of one type: the many-faced artist. This authentic artist sees the truth, a particular blending of the eyes of sense and the eyes of understanding, which he defines as "fancy." Chapter four is devoted to a discussion of "fancy," Browning's word for the poetic imagination. Since I argue that his poetic can be understood in terms of the emblem tradition, his concept of the shaping power of the poet's vision would necessarily form part of the emblematic configuration. By considering Browning's concept of "fancy" as he figured it in terms of a digestive analogy, one finds that he connects the message of the

poet with the most fundamental forces governing the working of life. This force is essentially moral and can be told as fables or allegorical tales.

The didacticism of emblems and their allegorical framework enables the visionary artist to cast ultimate truths in the form of fables. This gospel according to Browning is complex, as varicolored as the flower which is one hieroglyph for his poetry in "Cleon." While Browning has often been accused of an overly simple, beaming vision which distrusts the intellect, his pleasure knows of pain, his radiances know about blackness. While not dismissing the intellect, this highly intellectual poet recognized that knowledge is not enough for comprehension. Ultimately, his view is dualistic; a Zoroastrian universe of black and white was one with which he was uncomfortably familiar. In a world which presents itself as multiplicity, it is hard to distinguish between good and bad, black and white. In this regard, chapter four examines a late volume, Ferishtah's Fancies in which Browning wears a transparent robe of Ferishtah, the dervish who reads the hieroglyphs of nature, in one case black and white beans, as allegories of the deepest truth figured in those signs.

In one sense, the first four chapters in the study are preparatory to the final chapter which discusses a late, largely neglected work, Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in their Day. Every aspect of the emblem tradition as Browning molded it to his own poetic vision is found in this work which Browning himself con-

sidered the culmination of his career. In it, he explores from various perspectives the many faces of the artist. When considered as a whole, the Parleyings exhibit a dualistic world where the dominant imagery opposes black to white and where it is necessary to examine body in order to reach soul. When each separate section is examined, one discovers a many-layered portrait of Browning's artist, his emblematic artifices, and his poetic vision.

In regard to my selection of works, I have largely focused upon some poems which have received relatively less commentary than the poems which traditionally have composed the critical canon. One aim has been to suggest that, contrary to the notion that Browning's "major" poetry falls conveniently within a circumscribed time period ending with The Ring and the Book, Browning wrote important poems throughout his life. Furthermore, a single-minded attention to his dramatic monologues, an emphasis of most scholarly writing, has caused Browning to emerge as a more enigmatic, "impersonal" poet than he in fact was. Browning's hieroglyphic style and vision gives his entire work a unity. By considering emblematic images and their philosophical implications for Browning's poetic vision, it is hoped that the phenomenon of his contribution to English poetry can be understood in relationship to a long tradition. Rendering his obligations to the past more plain does not, however, detract from the miracle of his invention nor does it deny the genuinely difficult nature of his poetry.

The density of a Browning text makes discussing a section of it problematic. To preserve the integrity of meaning, on the one hand, and to provide a manageable excerpt on the other, occasionally means an uneasy compromise. I have tried to provide a sufficient sample of each poem, particularly with the less familiar ones. With regard to a discussion of the Parleyings, however, this policy has been inadequate. Although I have tried to summarize the major argument of each parleying, so much of what occurs is part of the non-discursive poetic process that occasionally I have interpreted without a complete textual example.

Such difficulty gives the lie to those who have subscribed to Oscar Wilde's witticism that Browning, like Meredith, is a prose Browning, or indeed, to Browning's own self-deprecating description of his later poems as mere grey argument. The philosophical argument in Browning is no less poetic than similar parts of Chaucer, Donne, Milton, or Dryden who proceeded him. Furthermore, such modern poets as Auden, Pound, and Eliot may have learned something from Browning about how to adjust barbaric words to sublime subjects and to mingle private biography with public message. In this regard, Eliot's Quartets, Pound's Cantos, Auden's Age of Anxiety resemble Browning's Parleyings.

Finally, by concentrating upon a kind of image and the philosophical implications which it implies, this study suggests that hitherto little emphasized approaches to Browning can aid us in understanding

his position in English letters. To place him in the emblem tradition is not to deny his originality but rather to give us one means of understanding it.

In the sense that this study, like a Browning monologue, is a conversation shaped by many but voiced by one, I should like gratefully to acknowledge the genial presence of my advisers, John Hollander and Wendell Stacy Johnson. In addition, I thank Harold Bloom, Geoffrey H. Hartman, Rachel Jacoff, Richard L. Munich, Suzanne Schneider, and Irene Tayer for reading parts of the manuscript and offering valuable suggestions. Miriam K. Starkman first taught me about emblems. Robert Preyer formally introduced me to Browning and William C. DeVane made me comfortable with him.

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## LIST OF EDITIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

For the text of Browning's works, I have used

The Works of Robert Browning, ed. F. G. Kenyon,

10 Vol. London, 1912, known as the Centenary Edition.

Where possible, I have compared the Centenary Edition

to the new edition, The Complete Works of Robert

Browning, ed. Roma A. King, et. al. (Athens, Ohio,

1969 in progress). In no case have I altered the

Centenary text.

I have used the following abbreviations:

Handbook: DeVane, William Clyde. A Browning

Handbook. 2nd ed., New York, 1955.

DeVane: DeVane, William Clyde. Browning's

Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind. New

Haven, 1929.

## CHAPTER 1

## Browning the Hierophant: The Emblem Tradition

Poets are the hierophants of an  
unapprehended inspiration.  
Shelley, A Defence of Poetry

In nature are signatures  
needing no verbal tradition  
Pound, Cantos (87/573:609)

Ezra Pound, a great student of Browning and a zealous teacher of literature, urged his students in ABC of Reading, to avail themselves of the rarely admired Sordello. Pound's enthusiasm for a work which had been a favored object of witty derogation since its publication (except by Rossetti, another recoverer of discarded works) could be due in part to its bad repute. Nonetheless, the prophet of arcana noticed in Browning some characteristics of language which had, to that time, been little appreciated. "It will be seen that the author is telling you something, not merely making a noise," Pound argued, defending the author against charges of obscurity. "The beauty is not applied ornament, but makes the mental image more definite."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>ABC of Reading (New York, 1960), p. 191.

Browning's skill at making the mental image more definite is part of his emblematic style. Pound, whose focus upon the Chinese ideogram displaces the idea of the hieroglyphic to another culture, would be particularly sensitive to this emblematic quality in Browning. Like the basic idea of ideograms, the philosophy which lies behind the emblem involves a system of archetypes and, like Pound's idea of the image, requires a visualization with hard, undissolving outlines.

"Making" for both poets imports metaphors from plastic arts. Pound praises Browning's narrative style for its "clarity of outline" and speaks of "applied ornament" as if it were a visual work. Both poets, moreover, relied heavily upon their knowledge of other arts. If they could appropriate the power of the sculptor (Browning tried sculpting in Italy; Pound nurtured Gaudier-Brzeska) and could employ his wordless power in their verbal skills, they would accomplish a magical feat and would elevate the poet to a plane where direct impact of impression would soften the powerlessness of one always dependent upon the mediation of words.

As a partial solution to this problem, Pound exultantly explored ideograms, images, and vortices. He might have caught some glimmerings of a similar tendency in Browning, who also sought a way out of the prison of the alphabet. Chesterton was perhaps the first critic to notice Browning's unusually intense interest in concrete objects. He describes the poet's fascination with objects and his "peculiar sense of material things. All that power of writing of stone

or metal or the fabric of drapery," marvels Chesterton, selecting materials of the sculptor's province, "so that we seem to be handling and smelling them."<sup>2</sup> He terms Browning's sense of the symbolism of "material trifles" the "apotheosis of the insignificant" and explains the quality as a "terrible importance of detail" which "possessed Browning in the emphatic manner of a demoniac possession."<sup>3</sup> Whether the trait was divine or satanic was a question which plagued Browning himself. Not merely a peculiarity of style, trivial objects tell of transcendent truths. It was not only Blake's visionary apprehension which could see eternity in a grain of sand. Whatever the supernatural origins of this kind of seeing, its literary traditions can be traced, at least in part, to the history of emblems.

Emphasis upon Browning's dramatic technique too often obscures his connection to a more visionary strain in English poetry. The monologue, as refined and perfected in the poems which critics most often attend to, gives a form to a "new" way of perceiving reality as a character unconsciously reveals the inner working of his soul. The form prepares for a mode of writing poems we now consider modern. This study of Browning will argue that part of Browning's astonishing contribution to poetry comes from his use of tradition, particularly the singular, almost solitary way in which he inherited it.

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Browning (London, 1930), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

Rather than concentrating upon his realism or debating his "objective" or "subjective" stance in relation to his poetic utterance, this consideration of the emblem tradition in Browning focuses upon a technique of making images. More than being solely a matter of style, however, the strategy of using emblematic techniques also implies a philosophy of art. The use of emblems or "signs" for Browning meant a way he could both ground his poetry upon the solidity of objects and transcend those objects to achieve what he called "truth in little." A study of the emblem tradition in Browning both helps to illuminate Pound's somewhat enigmatic remark about "mental images" and emphasizes a hitherto seldom recognized relationship between Browning, his Romantic ancestors, and his modern heirs.

#### The Emblem Tradition: Browning's Heritage

"The apotheosis of the insignificant" could be one way of defining the images of an emblem, that peculiarly compelling blending of picture and poem which enjoyed great popularity, particularly in the seventeenth century. Emblems never entirely lost an audience through Victorian times when new contributions were largely confined to children's literature.<sup>4</sup> Interest in reconstructed emblems was sufficiently lively for Robert Cruikshank to engrave new plates for Johan

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<sup>4</sup>Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (London, 1948), p. 98.

Abricht's Divine Emblems, a work published in London in 1838.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly defined, an emblem is a simple allegorical design or impresa, labeled with a motto and sometimes glossed with a Biblical text. A poetic description of the impresa connects the picture with meaning, frequently by means of elaborate conceits, sometimes with more obvious moralizings. The emblem was intended to teach a moral truth in an intuitive form. The visual part of it helped the intuitive apprehension.<sup>6</sup>

Emblem literature has both secular and religious traditions, but the one most pertinent to Browning traced its source to notions of ancient hieroglyphics. The written language itself was thought to consist of magical pictures or ideograms for which a hierophant was needed to translate the picture-writing for ordinary people.<sup>7</sup> This hieroglyphic tradition derives from Platonic thought and employs an essentially symbolic method of understanding the material world. Philosophers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance credited Egyptian hieroglyphics with being a language of symbols, connecting the tangible world and the spiritual realm. The mysterious language of ideograms

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<sup>5</sup> Mario Praz, Studies in Seventeenth Century Imagery (Rome, 1964), p. 166.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Lisolette Dieckmann, Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol (St. Louis, 1970) traces the concept of a hieroglyphic language from its origins to German Romanticism.

required an initiate as reader and conveyor of its meaning and thus became associated with hermetic thinking. The Hieroglyphica of Horapollo, a collection of animal fables claiming to be of Egyptian origin, came to be a main Renaissance source of hieroglyphic symbols. Emblem literature, by borrowing some of the symbols and much of the symbolic thinking from this tradition, claimed a similar relationship between the material symbols, the objects of perception, and a vision of the spiritual world which they symbolized.

Correspondingly, nature itself is written in the hieroglyphics of the Almighty. The art of reading it had been lost so that now it, too, requires a reader who has been initiated into its special language. Thomas Browne spelled out this concept for the seventeenth century in Religio Medici:

Thus there are two books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of her servant, Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript . . . Surely the Heathens knew better how to join and read these mystical Letters than we Christians, who cast a more careless Eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of Nature.<sup>8</sup>

One, thus, can study the Book of Nature with scientific attention and find a non-rational truth. In the nineteenth century, poets were to

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<sup>8</sup>Religio Medici, The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1928), I, Part I, section 16, p. 21.

agree with Browne's feeling that nature tells of the beyond. None of them would have difficulty accepting his observation about nature:

In this Mass of Nature, there is a set of things that carry in their Front, though not in Capital Letters, yet in Stenography and short Characters, something of Divinity; which, to wiser Reasons, serves as Luminaries in the Abyss of Knowledge, . . . The severe Schools shall never laugh me out of the Philosophy of Hermes, that this visible World is but a Picture of the invisible, wherein, as in a Pourtraict, things are not truely, but in equivocal shapes, and, as they counterfeit some real substance in that invisible Fabrick.<sup>9</sup>

Impresae, more simply and schematically than the Book of Nature, contain hard-edged, firmly outlined hieroglyphics. Emblem literature is one way of bringing into art a process of nature. The emblemist draws strength from divine analogy. He brings the hieroglyphics of nature into art, he revives the ancient Egyptian practice, he brings word of divinity to man. Paracelsus called these hieroglyphics in nature "signatures" and wandered the globe scientifically noting them. The heathens knew how to read the signatures, but the Christians have forgotten. Poets with their intuitive genius can recover this lost knowledge. Thus, Pound looks around him and discovers that "in nature are signatures / needing no verbal tradition." Browne would agree. In Browning's time, amateur naturalists roamed the countryside collecting specimens with Paracelsan zeal,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., Part I, section 12, p. 17.

and Browning, in search of this lost kind of knowledge which combined scientific "KNOWING" with intuitive "LOVING," penned his Paracelsus.

He also read Francis Quarles, an immensely popular poet who had written both fully developed emblems, with impresae, and emblematic poems. Thus, a difficulty--that of creating a visualization in words--had been encountered and some conventions had arisen to help a poet to suggest a picture which had disappeared. Poets such as Milton, Donne, and Herbert had solved this problem for devotional poetry. The hierophant would become crucial since the reality of the object would only be apprehended by him. In one sense, Shelley's view of the poet as the hierophant of an unapprehended inspiration addresses the larger metaphysical question of vision of which the aesthetic question of visualization is a part. Although with poets such as Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, and Lovelace, the actual picture has vanished, the visual element in emblematic verse shows through its verbal matrix. One finds traces of it in an emblematic point of view or philosophy where an image is thought of as a hieroglyph giving news of a transcendent nature. It can also be found in certain verbal conventions in which the poem, by various rhetorical means, draws the reader's attention to an entirely imaginary impresa, gives a motto, and then interprets the impresa. In a more general sense, poems contain emblematic imagery if they show a tendency to generate a series of analogies made up of concrete images which teach an abstract truth.

A general rhetorical paradigm for the movement of an emblem would be first to get the reader to attend to the impresa, whether real or imagined (Mark this or see this . . .); then the emblematist will give the allegorical meaning of the object (It signifies this . . .); then he will give the moral lesson (That means you should . . .). An emblem of George Wither makes a nice distinction between the two modes of seeing essential to reading an emblem:

When you have heeded, by your Eyes of sense,  
This Helmet, hiving of a Swarme of Bees,  
Consider, what may gather'd be from thence,  
And what your Eye of Understanding sees.<sup>10</sup>

The gathering in of meaning, moving from the corporeal object until it becomes an insight, an understanding of spiritual matters recreates the activity of emblem literature which moves the mind from the object to the spirit.

Richard Lovelace's emblematic poem, "The Snayl" illustrates a conventional opening for this type of verse. The poet addresses the hieroglyphic, and includes a conventional motto, festina lente:

Wise Emblem of our Politick World,  
Sage Snayl, within thine own self curl'd;  
Instruct me softly to make hast,  
Whilst my feet go slowly fast. (11.1-4)<sup>11</sup>

The poem continues by a series of conceits to present more images

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<sup>10</sup>A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne (London, 1635), Book 2, Illustration XXVIII, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup>Poems, ed. C. H. Wilkinson (Oxford, 1930), p. 136.

which embellish the central image of the impresa. Lovelace sings variations upon the "oeconomick Virtues" of the snail, each a moral lesson. At the conclusion, the snail becomes its own soul, a further example of its utter self-sufficiency:

Who now with Time thy days resolve,  
And in a jelly thee dissolve.  
Like a shot Star, which doth repair  
Upward, and Rarifie the Air. (11.63-66)

The poem follows a characteristic movement in emblem literature from a world of concrete objects to a point of transcendence. The snail becomes air; the object becomes soul. This is also a favored movement in Browning's thought.

Poems can contain emblematic images and can move from object to a transcendence of the object without strictly following the rhetorical paradigm of emblem poems. Clusters of emblematic images combine to produce an emblematic effect in which the moral and the interpretation are implied. George Herbert's "Prayer" and John Donne's "The Crosse" illustrate this variation upon a use of emblematic imagery without the rhetorical forms. Herbert defines a holy abstraction, prayer, by means of a series of unglossed hieroglyphics. In his poem, a sonnet, the sum of emblematic images adds up to an evocative interpretation:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,  
 Gods breath in man returning to his birth,  
 The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
 The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;<sup>12</sup>

In balanced and stately phrases he names the various hieroglyphics as if he were telling the objects of an impresa. The subsequent images add an attribute to the concept of prayer until the last phrase dissolves into a generalization which encompasses all the images but also depends upon them for its power: "Something understood." Unlike the other phrases, this last can have no image; the sonnet thus enacts the task of the emblem to lead the reader from the material of creation to the invisible fabric beyond.

Donne's poem is about the power of emblematic images to evoke and to recreate the mystery of the spiritual truth they represent. He begins with the symbol of the cross and explains why representations of it must also be acknowledged:

Since Christ embrac'd the Crosse it selfe, dare I  
 His image, th'image of his Crosse deny? <sup>13</sup>

Every crossing in nature thus emblemizes Christ embracing his cross and the Christian embracing its meaning. Donne reads ordinary images of the cross emblematically as reminders of its prime image:

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<sup>12</sup>Works of George Herbert, ed. F. W. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup>The Divine Poems, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1952), p. 26.

Who can deny mee power, and liberty  
 To stretch mine armes, and mine owne Crosse to be?  
 Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse;  
 The Mast and yard make one, where seas do tosse;  
 Looke downe, thou spiest out Crosses in small things;  
 Looke up, thou seest birds rais'd on crossed wings;  
 All the Globes frame, and spheares, is nothing else  
 But the Meridians crossing Parallels. (11.17-24)

The poem proceeds by a series of conceits to give moral lessons exemplifying how the spiritual cross works its ways within the framework of ordinary daily encounters with its earthly reminders. The power of material trifles to give a spiritual message is the point of emblems and is the point of Donne's poem:

Material Crosses then, good physicke bee,  
 But yet spirituall have chiefe dignity. (11.25-26)

The emblematic poet employed various rhetorical strategies to include a sense of a picture in his poem. He might station himself outside the picture and address the figure, or he might address the audience and gesture to the impresa, one of Browning's common techniques. Once having drawn attention to the object, the emblematicist may analyze its attributes, interpreting their allegorical significance as does Vaughan in "The Lampe:"

Met in thy flames, all acts of piety;  
 Thy light, is Charity; Thy heat, is Zeale;  
 And thy aspiring, active fires reveale  
Devotion still on wing; (11.9-13)<sup>14</sup>

The candle serves Vaughan as a point of departure, for he begins by

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<sup>14</sup>Works of Henry Vaughan, ed. L. C. Martin, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1957), p. 411.

seeing it as emblematic of spiritual matters; it serves as a beacon to comfort him in his horror of dead night. Ultimately, however, he must transcend the object as he realizes that his soul lives beyond the death of the lamp and the death of his body. The candle, once burned out, never burns again, but it has lead his thoughts to the immortality of his soul:

Only one point escapes thee; That thy Oile  
Is still out with thy flame, and so both faile;  
But whenso're I'm out, both shalbe in,  
And where thou mad'st an end, there I'll begin. (11.23-26)

Having a picture or at least a memory of a picture as part of his heritage, an emblem writer such as Quarles employs a technique akin to Browning's dramatic art: he makes the picture speak. In many cases, Quarles, who, like Browning, portrayed the soul as it reveals its spiritual state, opens the text of the emblem with words spoken by the impresa. In one emblem the soul speaks out in the midst of its torment:

Both work and strokes? both last and labor too?  
What more could Edom, or proud Asher do?  
Stripes after stripes; and blows succeeding blows?  
Lord, has thy scourge no mercy, and my woes  
No end? My pains no ease? no intermission? <sup>15</sup>

In another, the soul speaks in terror:

O whither shall I fly? What path untrod  
Shall I seek out to 'scape the flaming rod  
Of my offended, of my angry God? (Book III, Emblem XII)

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<sup>15</sup>Emblemes, Divine and Moral (London, 1736), Book III, Emblem IV.

In another, Anima is shown being enticed by both the earthly and the divine cupid. As one tugs her one way and one tugs her the other, she cries out in conflict:

O how my will is hurried to and fro  
 And how my unresolved resolves do vary!  
 I know not where to fix, sometimes I go  
 This way, then that, and then the quite contrary:  
 (Book IV, Emblem I)

Browning probably knew Quarles's emblems before he could read them.<sup>16</sup> The emblematic techniques in his poetry provide evidence of his thorough knowledge of the emblem tradition. His habit of spinning analogies from concrete images, his tendency to use material objects allegorically, his attempt to characterize abstractions in terms of particularities recall methods of emblematic poets, specifically those of the seventeenth century. Moreover, various aspects of emblematic technique and ways of thinking persist from the beginning of his career, where he experimented with writing emblems to the end, particularly in the Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day and in a shorter poem, "Development," where he argues for an emblematic interpretation of literature. The original titles of poems in a late volume, Ferishtah's Fancies, "Belief," "Pain," "Incarnation," "Gratitude," indicate an affinity with emblematic thought. Some titles in his final volume, Asolando,

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<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning, 2nd ed. rev. F. G. Kenyon (Boston, 1908), p. 30.

"Dubiety, " "Now, " "Humility, " "Inapprehensiveness," also suggest an emblematic framework in a similar fashion to Caesare Ripa's Iconologia,<sup>17</sup> a handbook of allegorical personifications in which abstractions are given appropriate dress, attitudes and colors.

Furthermore, the evidence of stylistic imitations, though certainly significant, is not the only way in which Browning's work takes part in the emblem tradition. Browning's attraction to emblem literature, like that of many of his Fundamentalist contemporaries, may be in part based on a conviction that individual intuitive perception of the commonplace leads one to the truth of the supernatural. His aesthetics is closely allied to the ars emblematica in the sense that both Browning and the emblem writers assigned a symbolic function to objects, felt that poetry taught intuitive truths, and believed that the truth they told was intimately connected to earthly life.<sup>18</sup> For the emblem writers, who, like Browning, occasionally purveyed abstruse learning, everything concerning man is a proper concern of literature. When criticized for writing of sordid, sensationalistic, morbid subjects in such works as Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Browning could echo Wither: "The Muses may treat anything."

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<sup>17</sup>Edward Maser has edited and translated the 1758-60 Hertel edition of Ripa's Iconologia (New York, 1971).

<sup>18</sup>Robert J. Clements, "Ars Emblematica," Romantisches Jahrbuch 8 (1957), 95-109.

At the end of his life, Browning looked for the springs of his art in early memories of his favorite childhood authors. In the Parleyings, his idiosyncratic aesthetic autobiography, he pays homage to the fascinating library of his father which gave shape to his thoughts. Browning's heritage in the emblem tradition can also be traced to his readings in that library. The young Browning found Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Francis Quarles, who can be considered as paradigms for his emblematic poetry and poetics. Agrippa and Paracelsus provide models for the image of poet as hierophant, conveyor of special knowledge. Quarles teaches him how this kind of poet might embody his knowledge in common objects. Finding traces of these three writers in Browning's works reveals a somewhat altered portrait of Browning's artistry.

Browning and Agrippa: "We are teaching forbidden things"

Before welcoming the reader to the wisdom revealed in his first work, Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession (1833), Browning enigmatically issues, in a Latin prefatory note, a warning to the unwary. Browning copied his disclaimer from De occulta philosophia by Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, a work arguing that man can best gain knowledge of God by means of magic. The theme of Agrippa's work may have suggested to Browning that a poet's best means of conveying knowledge of God is through a magic artifice which veils its meanings as it reveals it. The note also pays indirect homage to his father's

library where he found the volume<sup>19</sup> and to Shelley whose Alastor showed Browning how to objectify his feelings into an allegory.

Shelley explained in a Preface that his poem was "allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind,"<sup>20</sup> and Browning shows in Pauline that he had read Shelley carefully.<sup>21</sup> Browning may also have identified himself with a tendency in his revered "Sun-Treader" to shun a wide readership, to obscure his work from the prying eyes of the uninitiated, and to seek unorthodox, if not heretical, ways of reaching spiritual truth.<sup>22</sup>

Though Browning may later have regretted it as being "absurdly pretentious"<sup>23</sup> for an uncompleted work, the quotation from Agrippa could stand at the beginning of his own completed works as a first indication of a main concern of his, the role of the poet in regard to

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<sup>19</sup>Griffin, N. Hall and Minchin, H. C., The Life of Robert Browning (London, 1910), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>"Preface to Alastor," The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed., Neville Rogers, II, 1814-1817, (Oxford, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>21</sup>Pottle, Frederick A., Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts (Chicago, 1924).

<sup>22</sup>James Rieger, The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley (New York, 1967).

<sup>23</sup>Browning's note after the passage from Agrippa when he agreed "with extreme repugnance" to include Pauline in his Collected Works of 1863. The entire note reads as follows: "This introduction would appear less absurdly pretentious did it apply, as was intended, to a completed structure of which the poem was meant for only a beginning and remains a fragment."

his audience. The image of the poet who feels himself in a precarious position and who seeks a small, select band of sympathetic, admiring peers continues throughout his poetry. The audience, variously hostile or admiring, and the poet's attitude towards this ambiguous troop shifts accordingly. This image of the "troop of shadows," as Browning terms them in Pauline, will be traced in the next chapter.

Browning indicates through Agrippa that he was aware and afraid of the vulnerability of one who reveals deep truths. John Stuart Mill's penetrating review<sup>24</sup> in which he uncovered Browning's thin disguise was not the only reason Browning retreated from confession to history for his next work. Although the warning appears to protect the unwary yet unfriendly reader from himself, it also implies that the writer already fears the suffering which a wounded reader can inflict:

I have no doubt that the title of our book may by its unusual character entice very many to read it, and that among them some of biased opinions, with weak minds--many even hostile and churlish--will attack our genius, who in the rashness of their ignorance will cry out, almost before they have read the title, that we are teaching forbidden things, are scattering the seeds of heresies, that we are an annoyance to righteous ears, to enlightened minds an object of offence; so taking care for their

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<sup>24</sup>Mill's review was never published, but his review copy, with his marginalia is in the Forster-Dyce Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Most biographies quote from the review. See Irvine and Honan, The Book, The Ring, and The Poet (New York, 1974), p. 40.

consciences that neither Apollo, nor all the Muses, nor an angel from heaven could save me from their execration. To these I now give counsel not to read our book, neither to understand it nor remember it; for it is harmful, poisonous; the gate of Hell is in this book; it speaks of stones--let them beware lest by them it beat out their brains. But if you who come to its perusal with unprejudiced minds will exercise as much discernment and prudence as bees in gathering honey, then read with safety. For I think you will receive not a little of instruction and a great deal of enjoyment. On the other hand, if you find things which do not please you, pass over them and make no use of them. For I DO NOT RECOMMEND THESE THINGS TO YOU: I MERELY TELL YOU OF THEM. You do not on that account reject the rest. Therefore if anything has been said rather freely, forgive my youth; I wrote this work when I was less than a youth.<sup>25</sup>

For the youthful Browning as well as for Agrippa, the "things" he had to teach would repel the ordinary reader; he would find them foreign, even threatening, occasionally wicked. "The gate of Hell is in this Book," thunders Agrippa. Although the curious reader may fail to find much of a diabolical cast in Pauline, the strong sense of guilt which pervades the work betrays Browning's feeling that he was writing about forbidden energies. In an image which concentrates the terrible ambivalence of strong feelings and which suggests their maternal nature, Browning confesses, "I have nursed up energies, /They will prey on me." (ll. 481-82) The poet continues to wonder about his

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<sup>25</sup>Translated by Frederick Pottle, op. cit., and also in Appendix E, Browning: Poetical Works, 1833-64, ed. Ian Jack (London, 1970), p. 944.

relationship to a "sleepless harpy" (ll. 624 ff.) which lives within him:

I cannot chain my soul: it will not rest  
 In its clay prison, this most narrow sphere:  
 It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,  
 Which nowise I account for nor explain,  
 But cannot stifle, being bound to trust  
 All feelings equally, to hear all sides:  
 How can my life indulge them? Yet they live,  
 Referring to some state of life unknown. (ll. 593-600)

Aside from the normal self-dramatization of adolescent revelations, part of the turmoil and wildness of the poem has to do with his feeling that he is revealing too much. Thus, the heading, like a signpost, prepares or seeks to prevent the too timid traveler from straying into a state of life which remains unknown yet forbidding to Browning himself. Rather than explain the author's intentions or prepare the reader for the work that follows, the note warns him without helping him. Only the brave and the sympathetic will continue. Browning maintained throughout his career that he was not interested in entertaining the thoughtless, and here he betrays a suspicion that those with comfortable, established beliefs may not find their way through his poetry.

Browning's work, in fact, has never been readily accessible to the many. He openly shunned explication and in his poems imagined creatures who believe that they have been chosen for extraordinary deeds. In this sense his Perseus may be a relative of his Johannes Agricola. The extraordinary artist or hierophant is one who reads dangerous signs, but to convey them safely he needs to

protect himself and ordinary minds from the white light of its power. Hence, a poet seeks an artifice which reveals truth but also veils it so that reader can accept it without harm to the artist, and consequently, so that the power of the magic will destroy neither.

The note establishes a dialectic between the forces of good and of evil, of the inner circle and of the outsider, terms which continue in the whole of Browning's work. Renaissance philosophers, along with Agrippa and Paracelsus, particularly Pico della Mirandola, expressed the view that allegory, by veiling truth, preserves the health of human society.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, rending the veil of allegory is dangerous and can only be done by a chosen few. Browning's sensitivity to the war between good and evil and his awareness of the complexity of the maneuvers in the battle arm both his poetry with themes and his poetic with an allegorical framework in which the dialectic can be debated on various levels. In this sense, The Ring and the Book is a highly complex working out of the consciousness of the war between good and evil.

Browning explained his allegorical poetic in his last work, the Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day, an important work which will be examined in the last chapter. At this point, however, it may be sufficient to notice that the prefatory note from

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<sup>26</sup>Michael Murrin, The Veil of Allegory (Chicago, 1969), p. 13.

Agrippa suggests this allegorical framework for his poems. Michael Murrin's description of Renaissance allegorical poets could, with no revision, apply to Browning as well:

The allegorical poet affects his audience more in the manner of a Hebrew prophet than in that of a classical orator. Instead of appealing to all the people and attempting to win them over to a particular point of view, the poet causes a division in his audience, separating the few from the many, those who understand from those who cannot . . . .<sup>27</sup>

At the outset of his career, Browning dramatically cloaks himself in the robe of Agrippa and wards off the unwary. Using the analogy of the hierophant of ancient mysteries, a hint he may have taken from Shelley's A Defence of Poetry, he, like the hierophant, classified his public (at this point, more imaginary than real) into the sacred and the profane. Rather than abandoning these categories with growing maturity and increasing popularity, he held on to this distinction and its implied distrust of the masses. His attitude toward the crowd can be traced throughout his poetry. He gives this attitude full treatment in the "Parleying With Francis Furini," in the work which he intended to be the summary of his poetic career.

In Pauline, Browning gives a tentative definition of such an artist who can safely work with inflammatory information:

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one  
 Who chronicled the stages of all life,  
 And so thou bad'st me shadow this first stage.<sup>28</sup>

The shadows of truth in the poetry suggest more than they tell and accord with a poetic which seeks a means to reveal safely, with harm neither to giver nor to receiver. In this passage, as in the note from Agrippa, Browning suggests that the task of the perfect bard, like that of the hierophant, is to uncover mysterious meaning and to convey that meaning in difficult but not impossible signs, so that the reader, like the initiate, can travel beyond "the sign to the thing signified." ("Parleying With Bernard de Mandeville"). Like earlier allegorical poets, Browning argued that allegorical poems should be based upon historical events, both personal and public. Hence, he uses the word "chronicle." These historicized legends could be molded into the cosmic truth of myth. By understanding the deeper truth of history, the poet revealed and served that deeper truth, but only indirectly: "shadowed." This allegorical philosophy, which Browning argues for in overt terms in "Parleying With Daniel Bartoli," can be seen in the individual portraits of the dramatic monologues, the longer poems

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<sup>28</sup>These lines are from the revised version of the poem. For the original version, see Ian Jack ed. (London, 1970), Appendix A, p. 899. DeVane points out that Browning changed the original word "shadowed" to "chronicled" and believes that this change indicates an alteration in his aims as a poet. See Handbook, p. 40. Since Browning does retain the "shadow" in the following line, DeVane is perhaps being overly programmatic in his reading.

such as Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Inn Album, and most notably in The Ring and the Book.

A chronicle, a legend based upon fact and taken from history, can serve the hierophant as a beginning for an allegorical interpretation. In one passage in Pauline, Browning alludes to his feeling of being chosen or "beloved," expands upon his note from Agrippa, and prefigures his interest in a historical person, a seeker of signs and omens and occult knowledge: Paracelsus:

As I look back, I see that I have halted  
Or hastened as I looked towards that star--  
A need, a trust, a yearning after God:

I felt as one beloved, and so shut in  
From fear; and thence I date my trust in signs  
And omens, for I saw God everywhere;  
(11.203-95; 300-02)

From a rather vague trust in signs and omens, shadows of God's truth, Browning turned to Paracelsus, a historical figure who knew Agrippa and who systematised creation, the signs and omens of God, into signatures, a comprehensible, though intuitive rather than rationalistic, whole.

Browning and Paracelsus: Signatures, the Book of Human Nature

And yet those blottings chronicle a life--  
A whole life, and my life!  
Paracelsus, Part II, 11. 37-38.

Browning's turn to Paracelsus, a momentous enough stride in itself, did not, however, signify a turning away from the subjective concerns of Pauline. The poet still believed that a perfect bard was

one who chronicled the stages of a life, and he "found" history as a way to order his vision. The vision, however, remains subjective; the inner strivings and aspirations of a psyche is still the subject; confession is still the tone of many of the speeches of his new hero. Shelley's radiance shines yet in the poem, but the younger poet indicates a development in his praise of his idol in the image of radiance. From homage to the "Sun-Treader"<sup>29</sup> in Pauline, Browning consistently addresses Paracelsus as "Aureole," a nice transformation to a being whose radiance is lent by the sun or imitates its golden aura from the more flamboyant image of one whose path is the source of that glory. Browning's frequent use of variations upon the word "glorious"<sup>30</sup> supports his name, "Aureole" rather than his many other names which Browning might have used; "Bombast," for example, which would have emphasized another side of his complex subject's shortcomings. Both "Aureole" and "Aprile" in this sense suggest

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<sup>29</sup>I have been unable to trace this image, but perhaps Browning found it in hymnody. Vaughan's "The World," (which was probably unavailable to Browning) has the image:

The way which from this dead and dark abode  
Leads up to God,  
A way where you might tread the Sun and be  
More bright than he.

<sup>30</sup>Broughton, Leslie N., Stelter, B. F., A Concordance to the Poems of Robert Browning (New York, 1924-25) II, p. 840 out of the 37 times the word "glorious" appears in Browning, 13 occur in Paracelsus, also "glory" appears 15 times as well as 2 each of "glories" and "glorified," 1 of "gloriously."

spring-like, early spirits, in spite of the prematurely aged, Alastor-inspired face of Browning's quester. In regard to the Shelleyan aspect of Browning then, the naming suggests that Browning's prime poetic influence loses its more radiant, obvious, youthful marks upon his poetry and moves into a more profound area.<sup>31</sup> Browning seeks his own voice and finds it after a long search. In this work, he turns to history; for the most part, his heroes lose their aureoles, join an earthly band, quest in the emblems of daily life for evidence of a great truth.

Although the historical figure of Paracelsus could appear to a reading public as safely distant in time from the Browning family's Victorian cottage in Camberwell and Robert's inner life,<sup>32</sup> the poet's father's gift of re-vivifying characters from the past might have made the occult philosopher, if not exactly a household companion, at least a familiar and welcome guest to the youthful Browning's imagination. His first introduction to Paracelsus may have come from Nathaniel Wanley's The Wonders of the Little World, one of Browning's favorite childhood books where both Agrippa and his colleague, Paracelsus,

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<sup>31</sup>I agree with the basic argument of Harold Bloom in regard to Shelley's importance to Browning, although I do not think it is necessary to take his readings of Browning literally. See, for example, Harold Bloom, "Browning: Good Moments and Ruined Quests," Poetry and Repression (New Haven, 1975), pp. 176-78.

<sup>32</sup>Betty Miller, "A Garden in the Environs" Robert Browning: A Portrait (London, 1952), pp. 4 ff. gives an interesting biographical reading of Paracelsus.

appear in anecdotes which may have made their names familiar to the child.<sup>33</sup> Making the relatively insignificant sketches real to young Browning would have been a pleasant task for the poet's father who was gifted in creating homely scenes for his son, and who, according to Griffin and Minchin, "was completely versed in medieval legend and seemed to have known Paracelsus, Faustus and even Talmudic personages personally."<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, when Browning's dashing friend, the Count Amédée de Ripert-Monclar suggested Paracelsus as a subject for a poem the alacrity with which his hint was taken up may indicate that the medieval philosopher already occupied a place in Browning's mind. As he explained in Sordello, a young rather solitary youth can people his life with many creatures. (Book I, 11. 747 ff.) The Count's suggestion may have arisen in the course of a conversation about history which could have been inspired by Robert senior's collection of volumes about Paracelsus. Browning's father's library contained all the historical information the younger man needed to write his poem. In any case, the connection between the Frenchman and his friend seems to have resulted in Browning's membership in the Institut Historique of France the year that Paracelsus appeared.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>The Wonders of the Little World rev. ed. (London, 1774), pp. 422, 682.

<sup>34</sup>Griffin and Minchin, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

It is thus possible to infer that the two friends shared a common interest in history.

Browning's insistence that his poem merely expands upon historical biography has generally been interpreted as primarily an attempt to avoid the personally humiliating experience of Pauline, the painful review of John Stuart Mill, and the Shelleyan subjective mode in general.<sup>36</sup> His emphasis upon history may also be directed towards his new acquaintance, and the dedication to him may partly explain Browning's apparently outrageous claim to historical fidelity. On the one hand, to please his friend, and on the other, to prevent autobiographical interpretation, Browning turns to the biography of a safely distant figure, claiming to write a poeticized biography, objective and historically correct. "The liberties I have taken with my subject," he audaciously asserted, "are very trifling; and the reader may slip the foregoing scenes between the leaves of any memoir of Paracelsus he pleases, by way of commentary."<sup>37</sup>

While in the guise of a medieval necromancer, Browning facilitated his autobiographical, Romantic, confessional nature. Notwithstanding his seemingly outrageous claim, Browning's alliance with historians falls within a long English tradition of allegorical poets. He uses historical and personal biography to serve as a way of

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<sup>36</sup>Irvine and Honan, pp. 46-49.

<sup>37</sup>Browning's notes to Paracelsus.

reaching a higher truth. Behind the outlines of an historical personality, Paracelsus, can be discerned not only the shadow of Robert Browning but, more importantly for his poetic, "blottings," a way of conveying meanings by the use of small, apparently insignificant clues.

In this regard, Browning, like Paracelsus, and also like his closer contemporary, Sherlock Holmes, believed that minutia and trivia are essential in leading one to uncover larger truths. It may be useful to compare Conan Doyle's famous sleuth to Browning's occult seeker after knowledge. His philosophy bears some relevant similarities to Browning's hero and to the poet's aesthetic. Sherlock Holmes could have received his education side by side with Robert Browning or at least to the same purpose and with the same apparent randomness:

He was not studying medicine . . . . Neither did he appear to have pursued any course of reading which might fit him for a degree in science or any other recognized portal which would give him an entrance into the learned world. Yet his zeal for certain studies was remarkable, and within eccentric limits his knowledge was so extraordinarily ample and minute that his observations have fairly astounded me. Surely no man would work so hard or attain such precise information unless he had some definite end in view. Desultory readers are seldom remarkable for the exactness of their learning. No man burdens his mind with small matters unless he has some very good reason for doing so.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>"A Study in Scarlet," The Complete Sherlock Holmes (New York, n. d.) I., pp. 20-21.

Browning, too, "was not studying medicine," although he attended for a while medical lectures by Dr. Blundell at Guy's Hospital.<sup>39</sup> (Paracelsus holds a respected place in the history of medicine.) The purpose of education for Browning as well as for Holmes was sleuthing, and both had an intense interest in crime and deviant behavior. Both believed that "blottings," those rarely noticed, rejected signs of meaning can be deciphered to "chronicle a life." Browning puts these impulses into his Paracelsus. Watson discovers an article by Holmes in which the detective reveals the philosophy of his method. Not surprisingly, the title, "The Book of Life" sounds occult and could have been written by Browning's imaginary Paracelsus who, like the historical one, wanted to write about the Book of Nature. Watson reacts suspiciously to its pretentious title which may, like the warning of Agrippa, serve to discourage the wary. Watson, not yet an initiate, nonetheless reads and summarizes its philosophy:

. . . it attempted to show how much an observant man might learn by an accurate and systematic examination of all that came in his way . . . . The writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man's inmost thoughts. Deceit, according to him, was an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis. His conclusions were as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid. So startling would his results appear to the uninitiated that until they learned the processes by which he had arrived at them they might well consider him as a necromancer.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Handbook, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup>Doyle, p. 23.

At age twenty-three, Browning found in Paracelsus a model of a necromancer who sought to find meaning in all that came in his way. Browning's claim to historical accuracy, moreover, places him in the company of earlier allegorical poets who felt that allegorical poems should be based upon historical events, both personal and public.<sup>41</sup> The raw material of history could then be molded into the cosmic truth of myth. But myths begin with minute observations, and they are about, first of all, individuals. Paracelsus shows a young Browning who is still perfecting his observations and, as one might expect at his age, focused somewhat more upon the power and glory which might come to a successful hierophant than upon the insights such a visionary would convey. Browning's Paracelsus, like many of his Romantic prototypes, the Wandering Jew, the Ancient Mariner, Melmoth the Wanderer, and particularly like his ancestor, the poet of Alastor is a questing solitary, but unlike many who preceded him, his goal is scientific as well as spiritual. Because he is a scientist, he searches out the objects of the world. He ultimately desires other worldly knowledge, but his attention rests upon the res creatae. His desire to "KNOW" is first of all to know creation:

So that the earth shall yield her secrets up,  
 And every object there be charged to strike,  
 Teach, gratify her master God appoints  
 (Part I, ll. 364-66)

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<sup>41</sup>Murrin, p. 168.

In the sense that a life may teach, Browning is interested in lives, his own included, for a purpose beyond mere confession. His autobiography turns into history; history turns into myth and fable. Paracelsus, as a historical figure, is a logical development from Agrippa in Pauline, because of his particular philosophy. Griffin and Minchin have convinced most of Browning's readers that the young man's researches into Paracelsus were neither vast nor scholarly, finding all he required in a five page preface by Bitiskius of the three folio volumes of the works of Paracelsus, the volumes which his father owned.<sup>42</sup> Browning needed only this superficial research to discover that Paracelsus was known in the history of occult thought for his theory of signatures. He devised a system for reading the stuff of nature in a coherent yet a hieroglyphical fashion without making a rationalistic argument:

D'abord et avant tout, Paracelse est un philosophe de la nature: "Il m'incombe de décrire les choses de la nature pour en dévoiler les multiples secrets," dit-il. . . . Paracelse se met en devoir d'explorer les oeuvres de la nature, de découvrir les phénomènes éphémères et les lois éternelles qui la gouvernent. Ces oeuvres représentent, même si ce n'est qui'in-complètement le reflet visible de celle, invisible, de Dieu. Elles nous prodiguent les signes par le moyen desquels Dieu nous fait la grâce de nous accorder la fugitive vision de Sa secrète Sagesse et de Des magnalia. Dans

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<sup>42</sup>Griffin and Minchin, pp. 69-70.

les choses éternelles, c'est la Foi qui rend  
visibles les oeuvres; dans les corporelles,  
c'est la lumière de la nature qui révèle les  
choses invisibles.<sup>43</sup>

The historical Paracelsus, like Browning's creation, wanted to know first about nature. He, like Browning himself and unlike Shelley, insisted upon grounding the metaphysical with the physical. His philosophy of signatures tries to unify and explain matter as a hieroglyphical language giving news of its author:

For him [Paracelsus] every natural object is a signature, a cipher or character, i. e. some outward sign which, correctly understood and interpreted, reveals the basic "internal" characteristic of the particular object.<sup>44</sup>

Paracelsus' notions of the correspondences between the physical and spiritual aspects of any object relate to more widespread beliefs in the correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm as proposed in a representative thinker such as Pico della Mirandola<sup>45</sup> but are different from those more popularly held beliefs in the sense that they are based upon a different method of ordering and they involve a more complex system. Lisolette Dieckmann explains the system of signatures and differentiates it from other theories of correspondences:

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<sup>43</sup>Pagel, Walter, Paracelse: Introduction à la médecine philosophique de la Renaissance (France, 1962), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup>Lisolette Dieckmann, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup>See, for example, Marjorie Hope Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle (New York, 1960) which is largely concerned with the ideas of macrocosm and microcosm in the Renaissance.

It is a correspondence between the tangible and intangible properties of a thing, the outward hieroglyphical shape, behind and under which we have to search for the true meaning. The older order of correspondences. . . finds the same properties, predominantly those of the four elements, in the three great realms of life. . . Signatures, on the other hand, are individual appearances of individual essences, a much more complex system, in which there are many essences, and the distinction between property and essence is changed into that between outward shape and true meaning. If the Book of Nature is not written in mathematical terms but rather in signatures, we arrive at a mystical concept of nature.<sup>46</sup>

Browning's Aureole follows the sacred path of the real philosopher. He, too, wishes nature to yield up her secrets, and he too feels these secrets are sacred. Aureole, in short, aspires to be a hierophant of the Book of Nature. He is doomed to fail because both he and his aim are incomplete. The youthful poet alludes, with proper modesty, in Latin, to a rumor that Paracelsus was a eunuch:

He (Erastus) states that at the age of three Paracelsus was castrated by a certain soldier, others state that it was by a boar: at all events he was beardless, and a hater of women. I scarcely believe that he was a Swiss, for that region would scarcely have produced such a monster.<sup>47</sup>

Browning's poem is about the failure of this castrated quester, "beardless and a hater of women" to achieve his goal. In spite of "this

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<sup>46</sup>Dieckmann, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup>Ian Jack, ed., Browning: Poetical Works, 1833-64, p. 945.

wronged body" (III, 1. 689) he feels "somehow / A mighty power was brooding, taking shape / Within me." (I, 11. 509-11) How to give an external shape to the shaping power within is a problem for most artists. Browning struggled with this difficulty throughout his career. Paracelsus, a victim of a radically deforming or unshaping event, suggests failure in his very physical being, and Browning makes his spiritual goal one which reflects his bodily incompleteness: he is unable to "LOVE."

In this regard, the first meeting between Aureole and Aprile indicates that it is on the level of form and forming that completion takes place. When Paracelsus asks Aprile, "Tell me what thou wouldst be, and what I am," the spirit, which Paracelsus at first takes to be "my very self / With sight a little clearer, strength more firm," (II, 11. 348-49) replies "I would love infinitely and be loved." (II, 1. 420) In the speech which follows, Aprile describes his goals in terms of forming and shaping, words which take on the quality of ritualistic litany in their repetition:

First: I would carve in stone, or cast in brass,  
The forms of earth . . .  
Every passion sprung from man, conceived by man,  
Would I express and clothe it in its right form,  
Or blend with others struggling in one form,  
Or show repressed by an ungainly form . . .  
(II, 11. 421-22; 434-37)

Aprile, who feels the failure of his goal to love, nonetheless expresses his need "to inform" (II, 1. 442) that is, to give form to and to animate, and then to tell about the form, but he also aims to "perform" (II, 1. 461)

the great task of filling the world with the forms of his mind, "the offspring of my brain:" (II, 1. 451)

Bronze labyrinth, palace, pyramid and crypt,  
Baths, galleries, courts, temples and terraces,  
Marts, theatres and wharfs--all filled with men,  
Men everywhere! (II, 1. 458-61)

This is Browning's great contribution--filling the forms of poetry with men and women, everywhere. At this point of his career he reviews the failures of the past as he sees it in two shadowy offspring of his brain; the failed Paracelsus and his alter-ego, Aprile, whom the necromancer hails as a conjured spirit, "Myself of after-time, my very self." Browning portrayed his Paracelsus as following a sacred path but with incomplete aims. He needed to merge with Aprile before he could understand his own great theory of signatures in its fullest meaning. He knew that the signatures, emblems of nature, could lead him to knowledge of God, but he was unable to see beyond form itself. The "signature" was all; it was not filled with feeling:

The shows of the world, were bare receptacles  
Or indices of truth to be wrung thence,  
Not ministers of sorrow or delight:  
A wondrous natural robe in which she went.  
For some one truth would dimly beacon me  
From mountains rough with pines, and flit and wink  
O'er dazzling wastes of frozen snow, and tremble  
Into assured light in some branching mine  
When ripens swathed in fire, the liquid gold--  
And all the beauty all the wonder fell  
On either side the truth, as its mere robe;  
I see the robe now--then I saw the form.

(II, 11. 157-168)

Paracelsus' vision was blind seeing. His failure has persuasively been interpreted by Raymond as an inability to integrate the two aspects of Love, one Romantic, Shelleyan, ethereal, the other Christian, Victorian, and earthly.<sup>48</sup> It is also useful to see that Browning accepts the aim of the hierophant, Paracelsus to be poet of the world. The emblematic or hieroglyphic world view which Paracelsus and his signatures represent is a starting point for a reconciliation which a new poet will bring to the world. In Part V, Paracelsus prophesies that one will arrive to redeem his failure. Throughout his career, Browning labored to fulfill that promise: to inform the shape with feeling, to "play the enliver" of dead forms, to notice the small details which could lead to momentous conclusions, to see the contradictory aspects of the "truth." A poetic similar to the ars emblematica was one way for him to concentrate upon the earthly, even the mundane and commonplace things of the world while pointing beyond to a transcendent truth.

At the end of the century, Sherlock Holmes explained in "The Book of Life" the philosophy which, like Browning's poetics, took its inspiration from the same occult sciences that Paracelsus represents. Doyle, who was also interested in the occult,<sup>49</sup> applied the science of

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<sup>48</sup>"Browning's Conception of Love as Represented in Paracelsus," The Infinite Moment and Other Essays (Toronto, 1965).

<sup>49</sup>Doyle wrote a History of Spiritualism and also the preface to a biography of D. D. Home, the spiritualist who is a model for Browning's Mr. Sludge.

signs to analysis and detection:

So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it. Like all other arts, the science of Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study, nor is life long enough to allow any mortal to attain the highest possible perfection in it. Before turning to those moral and mental aspects of the matter which present the greatest difficulties, let the inquirer begin by mastering more elementary problems. Let him, on meeting a fellow-mortal, learn at a glance to distinguish the history of the man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs. Puerile as such an exercise may seem, it sharpens the faculties of observation, and teaches one where to look and what to look for. By a man's fingernails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt cuffs-- by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed. That all united should fail to enlighten the competent inquirer in any case is almost inconceivable.<sup>50</sup>

Browning was unafraid to turn his talents "to those moral and mental aspects of the matter which present the greatest with difficulties," but he remembered that elementary detail was one way of reaching the larger questions. He, like Holmes, believed that details were emblems of truth and enlightenment.

On his death bed, Paracelsus prophesies the coming of his heir and the redeemer of his emblematic vision:

. . . I failed. Let men  
 Regard me, and the poet dead long ago  
 Who loved too rashly; and shape forth a third

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<sup>50</sup> "A Study in Scarlet," p. 23.

And better-tempered spirit, warned by both:  
 As from the ever-radiant star too mad  
 To drink the life-springs, beamless thence itself--  
 And the dark orb which borders the abyss,  
 Ingulfed in icy night, --might have its course  
 A temperate and equidistant world.

(V, 11. 885-93)

Browning's aim to better temper his rashness may well have crippled his spirit, as Betty Miller suggests. Nonetheless, his accomplishments as a poet are astounding. To the end of his life, he wrote poems which are just beginning to be recognized, not only for their vast influence, but for their own merits as well.<sup>51</sup> As Paracelsus might read the "Book of Nature," and immodest Holmes might write his philosophy and call it the "Book of Life," Browning sought to write the "Book of Human Nature," one of the best chapters of which he entitled Men and Women. He chronicled the emblems of life and evolved a philosophy of apparent failure, as he knew from his earliest hero, the incomplete Paracelsus, that all human endeavor and human relationships are doomed to incompleteness. In spite of his reputation for mindless optimism, the image of a "dark orb which borders the abyss: / Ingulfed in icy night" represents the other side of the "flashing orb" which also appears in his poems. Browning knew both; his hierophant brings sad knowledge, as one would expect of one who could read the emblems of human life.

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<sup>51</sup>See Thomas J. Collins, "The Poetry of Robert Browning: A Proposal for Re-examination," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 15 (1973), 325-40 which argues for a careful reading of Sordello and a respectful reading of "Prince Hohensteil Schwangau."

Browning and Quarles: Earthly Facts and Divine Fancies

If Paracelsus urgently toured the globe to find signatures of God in nature, Francis Quarles moved inward to the strange terrain of the mind to chart the Hieroglyphicks of the Life of Man, as he called one of his emblem books. Browning, too, wanted to limn the emblems of man's soul. Quarles may have shown him one way of conveying his knowledge. Although *only one* Browning poem, "Earth's Immortalities" actually imitates an emblem poem, the importance of Quarles and the emblematic approach extends to rhetorical devices, to methods of dramatizing and externalizing emotional states and to an emblematic concept of the function of poetry.

Although the seventeenth-century vogue for emblem poems diminished, the popularity of Francis Quarles remained. Browning's father, whose interests did not necessarily reflect popular taste, owned Quarles in seventeenth and eighteenth century editions, but Quarles also enjoyed a popular revival in the nineteenth century. The surge of interest in emblems by the Victorians has yet to be documented much less explained, but the age demonstrated a lively and not merely an antiquarian regard for seventeenth century emblem writers.<sup>52</sup> Victorians saw spiritual meaning in flowers and other natural objects and were thus attracted to emblems. Facsimile

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<sup>52</sup>See, for example, Gisela Honnighausen, "Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti," Victorian Poetry, 10 (Spring, 1972), 1-16.

reprints of emblem writers came out under the apparently inexhaustible efforts of Henry Green, M.A. who edited Geoffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblems in 1866 and by 1871 had reached Alciati, the generally recognized precursor of all emblem books, when he edited for the Holbein Society Andreae Alciati Emblematum Fumen abundans or Alciat's Emblems in their Full Stream which was the last of a series of photo-lithograph facsimile reprints.

Browning's library, at the time of its dissolution, contained a copy of Alciati's Emblemata cum commentariis etc. per Cl. Minoem in which the poet has written "from my Father, Paris."<sup>53</sup> Browning and his father shared an interest in emblem writers, but Alciati may not have been a part of the Browning library at Camberwell. If the poet was not acquainted with Alciati in his early years, it is certain that he knew Quarles, perhaps even before he learned to read. Mrs. Orr observes that a Quarles volume in the Browning library, the seventeenth edition of his Emblems, contains one or two "very tentative specimens" of the poet's youthful handwriting.<sup>54</sup> In addition to this copy, Browning owned other works of Quarles which he kept and which were part of the library at the time of the sale.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Item 523, Sale Catalogue, reprinted in Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons 6, ed. John Woolford (London, 1972), pp. 158 ff.

<sup>54</sup>Orr, Life, p. 30.

<sup>55</sup>The items by Quarles in the Sales Catalogue: Divine Poems, two copies 1633, 1669; Divine Fancies, 1723 (dated Nov. 19, 1837);

Browning gives evidence of knowing Quarles in the same rote, unconscious, and affectionate way that children know such rhymes as Mother Goose, Quarles comes to his mind in unexpected ways, arising out of his childhood store of words. Kintner conjectures that the title of Bells and Pomegranates, while ultimately derived from the description of Aaron's robe in Exodus, owes its symbolism to the tenth of Quarles's Eleuen Pious Meditations.<sup>56</sup> As one who delighted in the strange and out-of-the-way in human nature, Browning's enjoyment extended to similar territories of human speech. In a letter to Elizabeth in 1846, not only does he use the rare adjective "mollitious," meaning sensuous or luxurious, but he remembers its source in Quarles. He imagines the scene of an encounter with Miss Barrett in a romantic mansion, full of stairs and passages, of picturesque accidents, "and sudden turns and visions of half open doors into what Quarles calls 'mollitious chambers'."<sup>57</sup> Kintner points out that Browning himself used the word in Sordello, "mollitious alcoves" in a sense closer to the meaning in the letter than to the ways that Quarles employs it.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, the Oxford English Dictionary

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Emblems, Divine and Moral, together with Hieroglyphics of the Life of Man, 1777. Judgement and Mercy for Afflicted Souls.

<sup>56</sup>Elvan Kintner, The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969) II, p. 241 n.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 405.

gives only two authors who used this word: Quarles and Browning. Quarles usually employs the word in a mildly disapproving context: "Can lusty diet and mollicious rest bring forth no other fruits but faint desires, rigid thought and Phlegmatick conceits?"<sup>59</sup> As in all reaches into the past, Browning's recapturing of a word from Quarles involves transformation, but homage to his own past remains in the revival.

More important than the use of a single word, however, is what Browning made of Quarles's emblematic framework or point of view. Browning expresses a central concept for his poetry in the use of the word "fancy." In a subsequent chapter, his use will be shown to be related to the idea of fable, an emblematic tale or parable. "Fancy" was an important word for Quarles as well. His use of fancy had not suffered from the relegation, beginning with Dryden, of the word "fancy" to a faculty inferior to "imagination." For Quarles, "fancy" could be divine. Browning follows Quarles and not most of his own Romantic forebearers in his use of this key concept. Browning's remembrance of Quarles's use of the word infuses his commonplace observations. His tendency, a motion of mind itself, to view mundane events as emblematic, that is, to ascribe profound meaning to them and, further, to acknowledge this tendency in himself to a similar movement in Quarles's thought, can be seen in a letter to

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<sup>59</sup>Oxford English Dictionary, M, p. 592.

Elizabeth: "I believe you are well after the walk," he begins. Then his mind reaches to the "walk" as emblematic of the progress of Elizabeth's health and he interprets it: "--the walk, what a 'divine fancy'; not mentioned by Quarles!"<sup>60</sup>

Although Quarles did not mention the divine fancy of the walk, another important person in Browning's life, Gerard de Lairesse, did. Later, he was to put the "walk" to emblematic use in the "Parleying With Gerard de Lairesse." Lairesse taught him to walk according to a "hieroglyphic table" in which a walk from sunrise to sunset gives an artist ample opportunity to use walking through a changing landscape for allegorical purposes in a less heavily didactic way than Bunyan, for example, but with a similarly instructional purpose.<sup>61</sup> Childe Roland walks also, but through a devastated countryside, and his walk also falls within one of Lairesse's hieroglyphic tables, "Of things deformed and broken."<sup>62</sup>

In a larger sense, Quarles's Divine Fancies, the title of one of his books in which the emblems appear without an accompanying impresa, become attached to Browning's term for the highest uses of

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<sup>60</sup>Kintner, II, p. 739.

<sup>61</sup>Gerard de Lairesse, The Art of Painting in all its Branches, trans. John Frederick Fritsch (London, 1778), particularly the chapter "Of Landscapes," Book VI, Chapter I.

<sup>62</sup>Handbook, p. 231.

the imagination. For Quarles, as for Browning, one's fancies can lead to a profound kind of teaching which can be effected through emblems. Quarles explains the relationship of his emblems to divine teaching in a note to the Reader:

An Emblem is but a silent parable; Let not the tender eye check to see the allusion to our blessed SAVIOUR figured in these types. In holy Scripture he is sometimes called a Sower; sometimes a Fisher; sometimes a Physician: And why not presented so as well to the eye as to the ear? Before the knowledge of letters, God was known by hieroglyphics. And indeed what are the Heavens, the earth, nay, every creature, but Hieroglyphics and Emblems of his glory?<sup>63</sup>

Quarles gave to Browning a way of seeing and of organizing the variety of human experience. Well before he had struggled with the dramatic mode and had made out of it his own, inner-directed, psychologically exposing dramatic monologues, he had taken in a theory of types. Behind the dramatic mask is the face of an emblem writer who used drama and an idea of a true dramatic poet to make the "mask of the actor move," as he describes it in Balaustion's Adventure (1871).

The true poet, unlike Paracelsus, sees behind the "merely-painted mask" to the spiritual essence behind each person. Browning's great gift was to create each character with a joyous particularity and sympathy which made it appear that he existed for the considerable accomplishment of being a unique person. Nonetheless, Browning's

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<sup>63</sup>"To the Reader," Emblemes, Divine and Moral.

dramatis personae are representative as well as representations.

His characters are variously depicted, but Browning himself suggests that he has in mind, as in Quarles, dramatic variations, psychological and spiritual explorations of types. In some of his early titles (which he later revised) and later in such poems as "Any Wife to Any Husband," he examines a representative situation. He may imply that he uses a character from a particular period in history to stand as an emblematic portrait of that age. John Donne would have had no trouble comprehending Browning's blending of the historical, the typological and the dramatic. Donne, a far greater artist than Quarles whom Browning knew well, understood how to use the theatre of the world for moral purposes. Douglas Chambers cites Donne to demonstrate this way of thinking:

"For our sight of God here," he says in a sermon of 1628, "our Theatre, the place where we sit and see him is the whole world, the whole house and frame of nature, and our Medium, our glasse, is the Booke of Creatures, and our light, by which we see him, is the light of Naturall Reason."

If we seem a long way from 'iconography' it is because we tend not to associate the playing of character roles for a moral purpose . . . with the emblematic and morally traditional. We tend also to forget how totally this way of thinking permeated the English Renaissance mind--that where we make a hard and fast discrimination between the 'scientifically' historical or clinically biographical on the one hand and the received wisdoms of typology on the other, we make a distinction that that mind would not readily have recognized. . . . The allegorical . . . , the moral, and the clinically

historical coexist within one work of art  
without any apparant uneasiness.<sup>64</sup>

In "Fust and his Friends," the epilogue to the Parleyings, that crucial work for understanding Browning, the printing press which sends out its "types" to the world can be understood as a final emblem of Browning, the poet and his relationship to his poems. The Parleyings will be closely examined in the final chapter of this study. At this point, it will be sufficient to notice that Fust and his types are prefigured in Quarles's Address to his Reader. Browning was surely one of Quarles's best readers. He found ways of making types live so that there is apparently little similarity between Quarles's abstractions of Anima, Divine and Earthly Cupid, and the full-blooded characters of Browning's world. Nonetheless, Browning, like Quarles, held that the heavens, the earth, nay, every creature are hieroglyphs and emblems of His glory. This belief holds his work together and makes a surprising unity of it. This is not to say that the nineteenth-century poet holds the same firm religious faith as his seventeenth-century precursor. Browning's faith was wrung out of doubt and despair and yet has less of the stern moral fervor of Quarles, whose moralizings, although kindled by understanding, are rarely lit with compassion.

Browning shared a reliance on typologies with many of his contemporaries. The Tractarians, English churchmen who were also

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<sup>64</sup>"A Speaking Picture," Encounters: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts (London, 1971), p. 32.

aware of their predecessors in the seventeenth century, went back to those earlier churchmen to reestablish their ties with original doctrines. They went out of the Bible to the Book of Nature to find types.<sup>65</sup> The Victorian quest for types extended beyond churchmen such as Keble who remarked in The Christian Year (1827) that the "Book of Nature was the ordained vehicle of revelation until God was made manifest in the flesh."<sup>66</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin also were convinced of the emblematic quality of reality.

Not the least among the similarities between Ruskin and Browning is their tendency to see the minute details of objects under their scrutiny. They both insist that profound seeing leads to knowing the emblematic import. In Modern Painters, a book which Browning knew, Ruskin responds to the Book of Nature by exhorting the populace to read it more exactly, to develop powers of observation and intelligence "which by cultivation may be brought to a high degree of perfection and acuteness."<sup>67</sup> As if he were sent to nurture the Paracelsus within his countrymen, he entreats the English to open their eyes, for the "truth of nature is a part of the truth of God; to

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<sup>65</sup>Ian Fletcher, "Some Types and Emblems in Victorian Poetry," The Listener LXXVII (May 25, 1967), 680.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 681.

<sup>67</sup>Modern Painters I, The Works of John Ruskin, ed. E. T. Cooke and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1908) III, p. 140.

him who does not search it out darkness, as it is to him who does, infinity."

Browning also sought infinity in the finite, and truth to him indicated an emblematic vision. Ruskin's lamps of architecture, as his father observed with some consternation, were hieroglyphic lamps which gave messages in a sort of Morse code, flashes of meaning which gathered into the radiance of the seven lamps of sacrifice, truth, power, beauty, life, memory and obedience. Ruskin's vision of Venice, written in desperation to save the past, is an emblematic vision as his father understood and eloquently reported to a friend on May 25, 1846. His words apply to Browning as well and conjure an image of the poet's Paracelsus in his search for knowledge from a book sealed off from the eyes of the many:

He is cultivating art at present, searching for real knowledge, but to you and me this is at present a sealed book. It will neither take the shape of a picture nor poetry. It is gathered in scraps, hardly wrought, for he is drawing perpetually, but no drawing as in former days you or I might complement in the usual way by saying it deserved a frame, but fragments of everything from a Cupola to a Cart-wheel, but in such bits that it is to the common eye a mass of Hieroglyphics--all true--truth itself, but Truth in mosaic.<sup>68</sup>

One of Browning's emblems for the progress of art is a mosaic floor which Cleon admires, seeing in it his advancement as a complete

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Seven Lamps of Architecture, VIII, p. xxiii.

artist. In the poem "Cleon," which will be examined in detail in a later chapter, Browning expresses a desire to claim all arts and to make them a part of his poetry. Both Browning and J. J. Ruskin may not have been aware that in using the mosaic, they seized upon the word which is the etymological derivation of emblem. Atciati gave his art form the word "emblemata," the Latin word meaning mosaic or inlaid work.<sup>69</sup>

In his Address to the Reader, Quarles touches upon one aspect of bringing the arts together which appealed to Browning. Emblem writers could claim power over two senses. The poet, with his skill to harness the power of language could also yoke the enormous drawing force of the artist. By uniting the two senses, the emblem writer could attract an audience and, by catching their interest with the symbolic picture and the intellectual play of guessing its import, could "alure men to the more serious observation of the profitable Morals couched in these Emblems."<sup>70</sup>

Browning consistently had shown an interest in bringing the other arts into his poetry. "My life," he asserted in Pauline, "has not been that of those whose heaven / Was lampless save where poesy shone out." (ll. 360-61) Many of his poems claim allegiance with music, and he has been credited with a sophisticated knowledge of

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<sup>69</sup>Praz, p. 23.

<sup>70</sup>Wither, Emblems.

music and a remarkable ability to conceptualize music in his poems.<sup>71</sup> His education prepared him well in both music and the visual arts. His musical education was entrusted to talented professionals, his father encouraged his skill in drawing, both by precept and example, and his poems bear ample testimony to his profound understanding of the particular strengths of the other arts.

In Balaustion's Adventure, Browning gives one version of his ideal of all the arts blending:

What's poetry except a power that makes?  
 And speaking to one sense, inspires the rest,  
 Pressing them all into service: so  
 That who sees a painting, seems to hear as well  
 The speech that's proper for the painted mouth;  
 And who hears music feels his solitude  
 Peopled at once--for how count heart-beats plain  
 Unless a company, with hearts which beat,  
 Come close to the musician, seen or no?  
 And who receives true verse at eye or ear,  
 Takes in (with verse) time, place, and person too,  
 So, links each sense on to its sister-sense,  
 Grace-like: and what if but one sense of three  
 Front you at once? The side-long pair conceive  
 Thro' faintest touch of finest finger-tips, --  
 Hear, see and feel, in faith's simplicity  
 Alike, what one was sole recipient of:

Although Browning describes what he might take to be a common reaction to art, few poets have so acutely described the experience of experiencing art. Moreover, it is rare to be able to experience all the arts from the stimulus from one. Many of his poems give voice to "a painted mouth." His poems about music indicate that the actual

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<sup>71</sup>John Hollander, "Robert Browning: The Music of Music," Strivers' Row I (Spring, 1974), 36-56.

sound of music had the power to evoke in him images of characters, creatures from a poem or a painting.

In emblem literature, Browning could respond to an art form which had already claimed two arts as its province. It could, thus, answer to his aesthetic sensibility as well as to his moral fervor because it claimed a dual power, a realization of Horace's largely misinterpreted adage, ut pictura poesis.<sup>72</sup> Browning's claim for the unified power of the arts places him within a long tradition in aesthetics, at least as far back as the Renaissance. The seventeenth century, also, desired a union of sense and thought in art; an emblem combined sense, or body or picture with thought, or soul or word. "The emblem and device may be considered as a kind of reunion on the printed page of the art object and the epigram," Hagstrum notes.<sup>73</sup> In this union, the arts would exchange qualities, much in the manner that Browning describes in Balaustion. "Poetry . . . would derive special excellences by assuming the voice and air of her sister. It would attempt to understand with the sense, to feel with the intellect."<sup>74</sup>

Emblem writers such as Whitney, Wither and Peacham who preceded Quarles, tended to write rather objective, impersonal

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Renssealaer W. Lee, Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting (New York, 1967).

<sup>73</sup> Jean H. Hagstrum, The Sister Arts (Chicago, 1958), p. 95.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

emblems in which the wit of the writer and the wits of the reader combine to form an intellectual game, an illustrated puzzle. Quarles and his followers (Christopher Harvey, John Hall, Edmund Arwaker), however, employed a more literary approach than their predecessors. Quarles demanded to be considered as a poet, and the verbal part of his emblems tries to do more than merely to describe a picture; it attempts to bring the visual sister into the poem. This aspect of Quarles must have appealed to Browning as it did to centuries of Quarles's admirers who refused to allow Quarles to take a place among the rest of the largely forgotten emblem writers. It was not only the exquisite and arcane collection of the Browning library which welcomed Quarles to its shelves. His was a well-thumbed volume in many Victorian homes, in particular of the Evangelical cast. Quarles, thus, may have been highly regarded not only by Browning's learned father but also by his pious, non-conformist mother.

Quarles represents a shift in emblem writing from an impersonal to a more subjective study of internal states. He adopted from the continent a Jesuit form of emblem which took previously secular, amorous impresae and translated them to a devotional framework.<sup>75</sup> Quarles's work introduced both new themes and a new method of allegorizing them. Whereas Elizabethan emblem writers drew from easily accessible literature, such as Aesop, Pliny, and classical

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<sup>75</sup>Praz, p. 156.

legend, Quarles uses his figures to "represent the individual experience of the soul in its search for sanctity, and their significance in psychological."<sup>76</sup> Many poems in Browning's work can be described in the same way. His dramatic monologues portray a soul in a search, often misguided, often mad, occasionally perverse, in its quest for justification if not sanctity. The conflict between good and evil is as much a theme for Browning as it is for Quarles, who represented the struggle as one between the earthly and the divine cupid. Browning, too, found that the exigencies of love on earth as it struggled toward divinity was one of his most compelling themes.

In addition to the psychological content of Quarles's emblems, the dramatic form of some of Quarles's poems may have taught Browning how one artist solved the problem of externalizing strong emotional conflicts. Quarles sets his personifications into actions, and their behaviour can be interpreted allegorically. Instead of the hieratic figure of an emblem writer such as Wither, Quarles presents a personification acting out an attribute in a way which resembles a rather primitive or at least a schematic version of a Browning monologue. Quarles will take a personification and place it within an allegorical scene which has further implications as part of an episode symbolising some experience of the soul.<sup>77</sup> He casts some of his

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<sup>76</sup>Freeman, p. 119.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

allegorical dramas in the form of a dialogue, suggesting the potentially dramatic nature of the conflicts of the soul.

In Emblems, Book II, Emblem VIII, Venus and Divine Cupid carry on a dialogue expanding upon the text from Phillippians III, 19-20, "They mind earthly things, but our conversation is in heaven." The engraving shows a confrontation between Venus, who dandles babe Cupid on her knees while shaking a rattle at him, and Divine Cupid, who is enhaloed and holds his hands aloft in the divine gesture of beneficence. The background shows the earthly city; the skies open to reveal the heavenly choir. At the feet of Venus sit two animals, possibly swine. The dialogue opens with a thoroughly domesticated Venus trying to pacify a distinctly unresponsive Cupid:

Venus: What means this peevish babe? Whish, lullaby;  
 What ails my babe, what ails my babe to cry?  
 Will nothing still it? Will it neither be  
 Pleas'd with the nurse's breast, nor mother's knee?  
 What ails my bird? What moves my froward boy  
 To make such whimp'ring faces? Peace, my joy:

In all too human fashion, Venus changes her unavailing endearments to abuse: "Come, come, this peevish brat / Thus cry and brawl, and cannot tell for what?" Venus alternates between sweet lullaby, cluckings, and pleadings to the determinedly miserable infant until, hoping to divert his steadfast tears, she brandishes a toy before his eyes:

Look, look, what's here! A dainty golden thing:  
 See how the dancing bells turn round and ring,  
 To please my bantling!

At the moment when her best efforts seem unrewarded, the profane cupid allows himself solace at the sight of the precious rattle.

Mother's reward is a smile which not merely relieves her but recalls to her an image of the amorous moment of his conception, a psychological subtlety not usually credited to Quarles:

Here's right the father smiles; when Mars beguil'd  
Sick Venus of her heart, just thus he smil'd.

Up to this point in the poem, Quarles might be writing a Browning monologue entitled "Any Mother to Any Child." He portrays Venus as a human mother in a scene that would be recognizable to any household with an infant. One imagines the facility with which a Victorian family could identify with this earthly mother and this commonplace scene.

Quarles, of course, is not Browning, but the rest of the poem, might have been written by Browning in his late years, although he would not have preached the same lesson of denial, and he never used so blatant a moralizing tone. Divine Cupid enters this domestic scene in Quarles's poem to interpret its allegorical meaning and to inject the moral. His stern tone greatly contrasts with the opening lines as he explicates the emblematic elements in turn:

Well may they smile alike; thy base-bred boy  
And his base sire had both one cause, a toy:  
How well their subjects and their smiles agree!  
Thy Cupid finds a toy, and Mars found thee:  
False queen of beauty, queen of false delights,  
Thy knee presents an emblem, that invites  
Man to himself, whose self-transported heart  
(O'erwhelm'd with native sorrows, and the smart  
Of purchas'd griefs) lies whining night and day,

Not knowing why, till heavy-heel'd delay,  
 The dull-brow'd pander of despair, lays by  
 His leaden buskins, and presents his eye  
 With antic trifles, which the indulgent earth  
 Makes proper objects of man's childish mirth.  
 These be the coin that pass, the sweets that please;  
 There's nothing good, there's nothing great but these:  
 These be the pipes, that base-born minds dance after,  
 And turn immod'rate tears to lavish laughter;  
 Whils't heav'nly raptures pass without regard;  
 Their strings are harsh, and their high strains unheard:  
 The ploughman's whistle, or the trivial flute,  
 Find more respect than great Apollo's lute:  
 We'll look to Heav'n, and trust to higher joys;  
 Let swine love husks, and children whine for toys.

If the aescetic tone of Divine Cupid does not utterly erase the appeal of Venus and her glittering temptation, it is surely not due to timidity on the part of Quarles. He interprets the impresa and its separate hieroglyphs in a strictly Christian context of denial. While the Divine voice of Quarles may carry with it a great ability to eschew earthly objects, his Earthly voice demonstrates an understanding, particularly in this emblem, of the reasons many would find it difficult to forfeit golden bells for the heavenly choir. Browning's delight in earthly music is so great, that unlike Quarles, he hopes there is a heaven whose choir is the same as earth's, only infinite.

Readers find great problems with the indeterminacy of Browning monologues. Scholarly energies have gone into debating whether the woman in "Count Gismond" is pure, what the Duke of Ferrarra knows about what he says, if Guido is saved. How many levels of ironies are present? Where is Browning stationing himself psychologically and morally? No one answer can apply to Browning's

poems, and the answer cannot be found in Quarles. It can help, however, to notice that if one removes the last part, the interpretation, from the Quarles emblem, one might have the same difficulty in understanding Quarles, especially if one also removed the impresa.

Without trying to argue that Browning wrote unmoralized Quarles emblems, one can see a similarity between the dramatic, psychological persuasiveness of Quarles that shows Browning's relation to a tradition. He movingly asks to be interpreted emblematically in the Parleyings, but, unlike Quarles, he cannot appeal with blind confidence to Divine Authority. He writes out of his own awareness of a universe which is always threatening to alter what appears as reality. The indeterminate quality of his work contributes to its ability to convey the feeling of experienced life and appeals increasingly to a contemporary audience trying to come to terms with negative capabilities that might stretch the capacity of Keats. His earthly facts were fragmented, complex, "truth in mosaic"; occasionally his divine fancies are too close to Quarles to be convincing for his own times. Nonetheless, Pound may have seen that in Browning fragmentary pieces, emblems, hieroglyphs were one way to convey a new kind of perception of reality. Browning may have found similar potential in Quarles.

Browning's Hieroglyphics: What of it? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say;  
A thing's sign: Now for the thing signified.  
The Ring and the Book, I, 11. 31-32

While Browning's major creative energy was shaping and re-shaping his Sordello, and while he was trying the role of playwright, he was also directing some of his energies toward shorter, more lyrical poems. The combined experience of these separate forms was ultimately to lead to the "invention" of his own characteristic Browning monologue, outlines of which begin to appear in a remarkable volume of relatively early poems, Dramatic Lyrics (1842). Many of the poems in this volume are "companion pieces," paired poems which comment and elaborate upon each other, although rarely in explicit ways.<sup>78</sup> Although these companion poems were later separated by Browning, who changed many titles when he redistributed them, a restoration to their original chronology and a reconsideration of their original labels reveals that Browning thought of these pairs, at least at first, as allegorical exercises, an attempt, as it were, to fit an abstract concept into a concrete image. In this sense, Browning's allegorical conception is similar to the portrayal of character as emblematic, a pervasive mode of thought of the English Renaissance mind. Donne would have no difficulty in understanding these poems as representations

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<sup>78</sup>Nancy B. Ruh, "New Perspectives on the Companion Poems of Robert Browning," Victorian Newsletter 36 (Fall, 1969), 5-9; William E. Harrold, The Variance and the Unity: A Study of the Complementary Poems of Robert Browning. (Athens, Ohio, 1973).

of types, as blending the allegorical, the moral, and the clinically historical in one work of art, as has been described in a foregoing section of this chapter.

Furthermore, the Victorians might have recognized a favorite pastime of theirs, the impersonation of emotional states. Dwight Culler has explained the relationship of these impersonations to monodrama as distinguished from the dramatic monologue per se.<sup>79</sup> The original titles to the companion poems in Dramatic Lyrics indicate that Browning is trying to delineate "abstractions" within a dramatically realistic scene, an exercise somewhere between the depictions of emotions in the monodrama and the characterizations of the dramatic monologues. The dramatic nature of the monologues and their occasionally dazzling evocations of a particular individual or of a particular situation have obscured the generalizing, allegorical impulse behind many of Browning's characters. Like eighteenth-century paintings where a "real" person represents a personification as well, Browning's early monologues demonstrate his interest in capturing a particular moment in history and in depicting it by using a "representative" character as an emblem of his age. For example, the well-known poem "My Last Duchess" was originally one of a pair, the other being "Count Gismond"; they were entitled "Italy" and "France" respectively. The same emblematic impulse shaped "Camp

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<sup>79</sup>A. Dwight Culler, "Monodrama and Monologue," PMLA 90 (May, 1975), 366-85.

and Cloister 1. Camp (French) and II, Cloister (Spanish)" in which the event and the character together form an impression, a portrait evoking a period and a nationality. This sort of personifying may be related to allegorical depictions of nations, such as one finds in political cartoons, or in the image of Britannia, if one could imagine her brought closer to life by blending her with a "real" woman and placing her in a dramatically believable scene.

Like many of Quarles's poems, these poems begin abruptly at an intensely felt moment. The pictures speak, drawing the reader into the scene. "Gr-r-r, there go, my heart's abhorrence!" The monk growls in "Cloister" with an effect similar to Quarles's Venus and her maternal cooing. The monk's soliloquy, relatively simple in regard to interpretation, turns upon a psychological irony which leaves little ambiguity between what the speaker reveals and what the reader understands. The emblematic signs of the cross in the poem point ironically to similar crossings in Donne's "The Crosse" and derive from the same emblematic tradition:

When he finishes refection,  
 Knife and fork he never lays  
 Cross-wise, to my recollection,  
 As do I, in Jesu's praise.  
 I the Trinity illustrate,  
 Drinking watered orange-pulp--  
 In three sips the Arian frustrate;  
 While he drains his at one gulp.  
 (V, 11. 33-34)

Like Quarles, Browning enhances the central image of his portrait by adding rather isolated, static, hieroglyphic images as commentary and

reinforcement. In Quarles Emblems, Book III, Emblem XIII, which is about the quick passage of time, the impresa is crowded with images elaborating upon the conflict of the soul which rarely feels prepared for leaving the earth. Divine Love tugs towards eternity a wailing Anima who resists by pulling away as she gestures towards a sun-dial. In the foreground stands an hour-glass; next to it, lilies droop. In the poem, each image is taken up and explained: "Thy glass is half-unspent. . . Read on this dial . . . Behold these lilies. . ."

Perhaps the most familiar example of a similar technique in Browning is in his brilliant monologue, "My Last Duchess," a poem which, though early, compares favorably with his greatest works. The original title of the poem, "Italy," and its sub-title, "Ferrara," give a specific setting for this portrait of an age as represented by one of its arrogant countrymen. The image of a gallery of pictures figures prominently in Browning; it occurs in various poems and reappears importantly and finally in "Parleying with Francis Furini" where Browning describes his oeuvre as a picture gallery. This early portrait, then, gains relevance retrospectively as the first appearance of that image. The Duke motions toward the painting of his Duchess on the wall, the emblem writer's gesture, but, ironically, it is his own portrait he "reads" as he instructs the emissary. In this larger portrait, the foreground contains an object like the lilies and the hour-glass in Quarles' picture and with the same apparent purpose. The Duke points to a bronze with the emblem writer's

command for the reader's attention:

Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in Bronze for me!

The dramatic appropriateness of the gesture in this particular setting may mask the allegorical purpose. At this point, as in similar moments in Browning's monologues, the speaker becomes the hierophant of his own emblematic portrait.

The subject of the bronze, Neptune taming a sea-horse, not only reinforces the image of the Duke, but it serves to describe the historical period. Readers have pointed out that Claus of Innsbruck is an imaginary sculptor, a fact which while interesting fails to go far enough in explaining the presence of this fictional Northern Renaissance artist. While Browning may have invented the sculptor and the subject of his bronze, his conception is a divine rather than a mere fancy. Had he lived at the time of Ferrara, Claus of Innsbruck, would have cast bronzes of "Meerwesen" in response to the current Mannerist taste for sea creatures, many of whom are depicted riding tamed sea beings, fabulous as well as actual.<sup>80</sup> While serving as an emblematic commentary on the character of the Duke, and of the Duke

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<sup>80</sup>Professor Walter Cahn of the Yale Department of the History of Art has given me this information and cites Hans Collaert of Antwerp (d. 1581) and Peter Flottner of Nurnberg (ca. 1530) as artists who, like Claus of Innsbruck, designed "Meerwesen." See also The Virtuoso Craftsman (Worcester, Mass., 1969), a catalogue.

as Renaissance Italy with its enormous appetite for artistic patronage as decoration for its vanity (the last phrase of the poem is: "For me!"), the bronze also adds an accurate historical detail in the portrait of the art history of an age.

In regard to depicting emotional states, two pairs of companion poems in Dramatic Lyrics indicate that Browning was interested as much in delineating a state of mind as he was in differentiating an individual personality from a general type. "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" were originally linked by the common title "Madhouse Cells." Browning introduces themes here which return in later poems: the concept of a perfect moment in the case of "Porphyria" and the theme of God's chosen in "Johannes Agricola." In these early poems, however, he started out to define types of madness.

"Queen Worship I. Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli and II. Christina," another pair of poems, seems originally to have been conceived as a portrayal of two men of differing temperament and different nationalities. Rudel is French and the lover of Christina is Spanish. Both men suffer from the same emotion, "Queen-worship," but they react to it differently. Thus, the two poems may suggest a contrast of national temperament as well as a difference in personal reaction to the same stimulus, so to speak. Neither poem is a Browning monologue in the sense that the listener (if there is one) does not modulate one's understanding of the utterance or engender

potential ironies in the interpretation of the poem. "Rudel" is particularly relevant to this study because it is the first clear example of Browning's conscious use of the emblem tradition. The emotion is distant; it is projected on to a landscape which we recognize as emblematic because it is schematized and personified. Then, after a short lyric cry, the feelings are further removed from the landscape to the device. The only "action" of the poem, aside from the plea in the second section, is the fashioning of this device. In "Christina," on the other hand, the reader immediately enters into the storm of the speaker's passion as he experiences it: "She should never have looked at me / If she meant I should not love her!" (11. 1-2)

Both poems explore themes which appear again in Browning's poems. In "Christina," the lover believes in a privileged moment of comprehension in which two people's life souls come together in a pre-ordained consummation. Such a moment gives meaning to life regardless of subsequent events;

Doubt you whether  
This she felt as, looking at me,  
Mine and her souls rushed together?  
(11. 46-48)

This precious moment is almost grasped in "Two in the Compagna," and in "By the Fireside" the perfect moment lives on in actual life.

In "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," the theme of the lover of a far-off lady, distant in space as well as accessibility, is a variation upon a favorite Browning theme, the pure love of a man for a distant, superior woman. In a sense, this Lady is a relative of his Andromeda.

While not a mountain, Andromeda is chained to one, and in the Parleyings, she becomes a constellation, surely a far-off lady. Furthermore, if the concept of an unreachable woman is extended to unreachable objects in general and if the quest for the Countess of Tripoli is changed to any quest beyond reach, then this theme can be considered as one kind of working out of a favored position in Browning's philosophy: "man's reach should exceed his grasp."

The literary origins of the poem can be traced both to troubadour and to emblem traditions. At the time he was writing Sordello, Browning read troubadour literature and discovered the story of Jaufré Rudel's legendary love for the Lady of Tripoli.<sup>81</sup> According to the legend which Browning read in Sismondi, Rudel heard from returning crusaders about the astonishing beauty and great hospitality of the Countess of Tripoli. He dedicated himself to her and left the court of England to gaze upon the lofty lady. His ill-fated quest ended, however, when he was seized by a peculiar but fatal malady, its strangest symptom being the loss of speech. Like Childe Roland, who gains his presence of mind to blow one final call on his slug-horn, Rudel regains his speech to bid adieu to the fair Countess, object of his quest and author of his doom:

Rudel . . . recovered his speech sufficiently  
to thank the countess for her humanity, and

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<sup>81</sup> Handbook, p. 121.

to declare his passion, when his expressions of gratitude were silenced by the convulsions of death.<sup>82</sup>

The elaborate rhyme scheme of the poem (Browning regularized the lines extensively for the 1849 edition) attempts to convey a sense of the intricate patterns of troubadour verse. The rhyme patterns of the first section fall into three parts, each rhyming in a different progression. In the shorter, less elaborate third section, this scheme is echoed but not actually repeated. The three-line second section uses the same end rhyme "look, nook, nook." None of these rhyme patterns mirrors Rudel's practices. They do give to the English reader a sense of the elegant, regularized control of sound, the "costly" rhymes and complex strophic form characteristic of troubadour lyrics, traits which are not usually associated with Browning.

The main action of the poem is the gradual making of the device, a form which is closely related to the emblem. Traditionally, a device is related to the emblematic picture but was distinguished from it by formal academies in Italy during the seventeenth century as being more rigidly defined. Praz explains that the device is to the emblem roughly as the closed form is to the open form.<sup>83</sup> Like

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<sup>82</sup>J. C. L. Simonde de Sismondi, Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe, trans. Thomas Roscoe (New York, 1848), p. 78.

<sup>83</sup>Praz, p. 81.

emblems, devices were intended to teach the truth by mysterious means. Pere Bonhours, in 1671, explains the effect of devices in terms suggestive of some reasons that the Romantic sensibility (even earlier than Browning) could adopt the idea of an emblem as a visionary moment:

[The device] cache à la façon des mystères  
 beaucoup plus choses qu'elle n'en découvre,  
 et l'on y concoit je ne scai quoi d'admirable  
 que l'on ne voit point, comme dans les tableaux  
 de ce fameux peintre dont parle Pline.<sup>84</sup>

De Vane points out that Browning adopts the "characteristic troubadour device of portraying the love of Rudel by the symbolic use of flowers,"<sup>85</sup> a characteristic less of the troubadours than of the Victorians. Rudel himself not only does not use the sunflower as his device; that particular flower does not appear in any of his poems. In fact, Rudel's imagination was not particularly inspired by flowers, at least in their botanical specificity. In one poem, he mentions "argentina" (eglantine or sweet briar)<sup>86</sup> and in another he mentions the "flors d'albepis" (hawthorne) which fail to please him.<sup>87</sup> He usually uses the word "flower" in a general sense when he

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<sup>84</sup>Entretiens d'Artiste et d'Eugène, quoted in Praz, p. 61.

<sup>85</sup>Handbook, p. 121.

<sup>86</sup>II. "Quan lo rius de la fontana," Les Chansons de Jaufré Rudel, ed. Alfred Jeanroy (Paris, 1924), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup>V. "Lanquan li jorn son long en may," p. 12.

celebrates nature as the reflection of his inner life, the muse of his songs, as in "Pro Ai Del Chan Essenhadors:"

Pro ai del chan essenhadors  
 Entorn mi et esenhairitz:  
 Pratz e vergiers, albres e flors,  
 Voutas d'auzelhs e lays e critz, <sup>88</sup>

Although Rudel writes of spring months, he uses them in contrast to his winter mood. He does not use the word "sun," nor does any mountain appear in his poems. Thus, the three elements of the device which Browning fashions for his Rudel are Browning's invention, though with appropriate care; Browning uses his traditions with fidelity to time and place.

Browning, in fact, may not have read Jaufré Rudel. The histories which he read <sup>89</sup> give only the story of Rudel's love for the Lady of Tripoli, a life history which had been extrapolated from the poems; nothing in fact is known of Rudel's life. Sismondi gives a short sample with a translation of Rudel's verse, stanzas which he may have arranged himself, but which give an idea of Rudel's rhyme patterns. From this small sample, Browning used the concept of the far-off lover, which may not have been intended by Rudel,

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<sup>88</sup>P. 6 Surrounding me I have many masters and mistresses of song: they are the meadows, the orchards, the trees and the flowers; the trills, the complaints and the cries of birds. (my translation)

<sup>89</sup>DeVane, Handbook cites Sismondi, Nostradamus, Tiraboschi as the sources of Browning's knowledge of Rudel, p. 120.

himself, and he may have expanded upon a slight suggestion of the sun in Rudel's image of the day rising and of love shedding its rays. The image of the mount is appropriate to troubadour countryside. The flower, variously called heliotrope, marigold, or sunflower, however, comes from the emblem tradition where it usually represents faithfulness, occasionally "weak faith," but it always signifies dependence upon a higher light.<sup>90</sup>

George Wither's interpretation of the Marigold is one sort of representation that Browning may have had in mind when he chose his sunflower:

When with a serious musing I behold  
 The grateful and obsequious Marigold  
 How duely ev'ry morning she displayes  
 Her open brest, when Titan spreads his Rayes;  
 How she observes him in his daily walke  
 Still bending towards him her tender stalke;  
 How when he down declines, she droopes and mournes,  
 Bedew'd (as 'twere) with teares, till he returnes;  
 And, how she vailes her Flow'rs, when he is gone  
 As if she scorned to be looked on  
 By an inferious Eye; or, did contemne  
 To wayt upon a meaner Light, then Him.<sup>91</sup>

The troubadour theme and the emblematic image join in the theme of dependence. Traditionally given a religious interpretation, the

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<sup>90</sup>Arthur Hendel und Albrecht Schöne, Emblemata (Stuttgart, 1967) cite a Spanish emblem which represents the Heliotrope as an example of weak religious faith because when the sun is not shining the flower droops, its faith inadequate to the darkness, III. "Pflanzenwelt/Bluhende Pflanzen," Cov. II Nr. 12, 313.

<sup>91</sup>Wither, Book 4, Illustr. 1, A Collection of Emblems (London, 1635), p. 201.

sunflower becomes an amorous emblem, appropriate to the worshipful stance of the French Rudel. Rudel's vida more than his poems had appealed to others before Browning, such as Petrarch and Heine, especially in the nineteenth century among those Romantics who were trying to reestablish the myth of medieval romance, itself a blend of religious and amorous quests. After Browning, Edmund Rostand wrote a play based upon Rudel, The Far-Off Princess, in which he cast the imaginary lady of Rudel's dream into a vehicle for the lady of the times, Sarah Bernhardt. He further humanized her with the name, Mellisinde.<sup>92</sup> Browning, however, gives the Lady no such specificity. She remains an emblematic abstraction, a Mount, a desired object in a landscape, a goal of a quest, much like the Dark Tower in "Childe Roland." She remains aloof, as the focus of the poem shifts to the dependent relationship of the sunflower upon the sun.

The poem opens with the lover's description of an inner landscape. The speaker does not describe what he sees with his eyes of sense but gives the vision of his eye of understanding. This landscape consists of three elements which become the three parts of the emblematic device. In the first section, these parts are described by an "I" whose vision leisurely unfolds with the distance, control, and hieratic quality of the fable he tells. As he creates an emblem of his

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<sup>92</sup>James J. Wilhelm, Seven Troubadours: The Creators of Modern Verse (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1970), p. 89.

predicament, this fabulist/lover speaks of his own kind of knowing from within. This "knowing" is emphasized by repetition of "I know" and by the rhyming of "know" with "snow:"

I know a Mount, the gracious Sun perceives  
 First, when he visits, last, too, when he leaves  
 The world; and, vainly favoured, it repays  
 The day-long flory of his steadfast gaze  
 By no change of its large calm front of snow.  
 And underneath the Mount, a Flower I know,  
 (11. 1-6)

Browning's use of capital letters for the three elements of the picture betray his inspiration by the practices of a writer such as Wither. This flower, representative of Rudel, is a "foolish mimic sun" who has sacrificed his own characteristics in order to be like his hero, the true sun who, although more majestic and closer to the stately mount, nonetheless fails to affect the sang-froid of the mount by his favors. What appears particularly onerous to the flower, however, is not the disdain of the mount but the disregard of the sun for whom the utter sacrifices of the sunflower of his own essence have not only failed to impress but have gone unperceived:

He (the sun) cannot have perceived, that changes ever  
 At his approach; and in the lost endeavor  
 To live his life, has parted, one by one,  
 With all a flower's true graces, for the grace  
 Of being but a foolish mimic sun,  
 With ray-like florets round a disk-like face.  
 (11. 7-12)

The mimic sun has no true rays and, indeed, no true face of his own. His doom, constantly to depend upon the motions of the sun, to droop when it disappears and to hope for its rising in the East so that he can

repeat a cycle of imitation, is the central image of the poem. Rather than the Mount, whose name varies, according to Browning's poem, depending upon the country in which she stands, the important focus in Browning's poem, almost in spite of itself, becomes the Sun whose same rays spread over the entire globe.

One does not need to ascribe fully to Harold Bloom's suggestive uses of Freudian theory applied to poetic influence to see in this poem the struggles of Browning with the power of Shelley's poetry and to read this device of "Rudel" as an emblem of Browning's self-regard in relation to the Sun-Treader. Such an interpretation can almost too easily be seen in the tone of the first section. If, as DeVane surmises, Browning was writing this poem while he was battling with the intractable Sordello between the years of 1838-39, his injunction in Sordello, Book I, to the shade of Shelley, to stay away lest he blight the writing of the struggling younger poet, gains additional poignance from this slight, emblematic lyric. The "disk-like face" of the sunflower sadly contrasts with "that pure face" (Book I, l. 62) of the spirit of Shelley, hardly a "shade" but a radiance.

Betty Miller presents a convincing argument for the permanent effect of Shelley upon Browning and his filial relationships. Like the sunflower, he, too, had sacrificed his own face to mimic the Sun-Treader. His great struggle with his mother about this issue left him with an abiding sense of betrayal, of both imaginative and emotional



"Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli" tells an aspect of Browning's own story. The device sewn with "these inexpert/And hurried fingers" could serve to represent his own early quest for the lady of the mount and suggests a later, nightmare side of the emblem as Roland, another traveler, meets his dark tower, an inaccessible pile to all but the doomed. This early poem only faintly suggests the darker potential in the worship of far-off ladies. Rudel too, however, like Childe Roland achieves the object of his quest only to die at the moment of its fulfillment. He, too, needs the sun for his power, as Cleon depends upon "those divine men of old time," his precursors. Browning's audience, like his heroes, Rudel, Sordello, Roland, Cleon, and Thamuris, is the sun whom Browning chose to emulate. As he grew older, he grew more confident of his own rays; his last major impressive work, the Parleyings, pays homage to Apollo (the Prologue is entitled "Apollo and the Fates" and will be discussed in an ensuing chapter) but does not bow to his superior light. By the end of his career, Browning no longer appears to be worried about being a "foolish mimic sun." He has his own rays. In a poem from Ferishtah's Fancies (1874), he describes his poems as raying light to illuminate darkness. He turns his sense of perception, his poetic vision, into an emblematic image of a shooting star as he points to it: "Mark the flying orb." Everything else serves his purpose as a poet: "stuff to try and test my power upon of raying light and lending hue to all things as I go/Moonlike through vapour." ("A Bean-Stripe:

Also Apple-Eating") "Rudel" marks the beginning of this path. It exemplifies one way in which Browning incorporated emblematic techniques into his poetry. As a work of his twenties, it demonstrates his first careful and obvious work with emblematic elements to form a personal myth.

In his next volume, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845), the paired poems which carry the common title, "Earth's Immortalities," Browning again struggles with some of his feelings about Shelley and again divides these feelings into two poems, "Fame," an imitation of a Quarles poem, and "Love," a lyrical song. The general title of the two poems present an oxymoronic comment which the two poems expand. Immortalities upon earth are transient; this truth may have struck Browning with a new intensity as he gazed upon Shelley's grave. DeVane conjectures that the first poem, "Fame," was a product of Browning's second trip to Italy when, in 1844, he visited Shelley's grave.<sup>94</sup> Whatever its genesis, the poem offers proof that Browning was familiar with emblem writers; the poem is the one example in his works of a fully emblematic poem. His description of the impresa is sufficiently clear so that the allegorical meaning is obvious without any moralizing interpretation. With a conventional gesture to the picture, Browning, as emblem writer, begins to "read" the emblem:

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<sup>94</sup>Handbook, p. 176.

See, as the prettiest graves will do in time,  
 Our poet's wants the freshness of its prime;  
 Spite of the sexton's browsing horse, the sods  
 Have struggled through its binding osier rods;  
 Headstone and half-sunk footstone lean awry,  
 Wanting the brick-work promised by-and-by;  
 How the minute grey lichens, plate o'er plate,  
 Have softened down the crisp-cut name and date!

In the companion piece, "Love," the refrain gives the lie to the permanence of earthly glories, both love and fame. "Love me for ever!"--the hope of lovers to find permanence in their feelings is the lyrical counterpart to the monument of the tombstone. Together, they form Browning's "Ozymandias" and could be glossed with his Bishop of St. Praxed's motto from Ecclesiastes: "Vanity, vanity."

In this volume, Browning also continued his emblematic characterizations in "France and Spain I. The Laboratory (Ancien Regime) II. The Confessional" both dark portraits of passion, intrigue and betrayal. "Claret and Tokay" later called "Nationality in Drinks" is a less successful effort to reduce a regional spirit to one hieroglyph, a national beverage as emblematic of the minor incident which the poem recounts.

Browning changed many of the titles of these early poems, thereby obscuring his generalizing concept of them, and, as his talents matured, he increasingly focused upon individual psychology rather than upon national portraits. Nonetheless, his most complicated monologues retain emblematic techniques. "Cleon," a particularly significant example of this method will be examined in a subsequent chapter. Emblematic artifacts, such as the chessboard in

"Bishop Bloughram's Apology," occur throughout his poetry, perhaps nowhere more insistently than in The Ring and the Book.

Browning opens his immense and complex work in the guise of a hierophant who brings the truth first in a simplified form before he dwells upon its complications. With the dramatic abruptness of many Quarles poems, he addresses his audience as he draws their attention to the ring: "Do you see this Ring?" As he describes the first object of his impresa, he begins, characteristically, to generate analogies for its "meaning," a significance which connects his ring with past rings; it is "Rome work" but imitative of

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,  
After a dropping April; found alive  
Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots  
That roof old tombs at Chiusi: soft, you see,  
Yet crisp as jewel cutting. (I, ll. 4-7)

The ring, like all art, imitates the past which is unearthed, occasionally by apparently aimless chance. Although buried in old tombs, it is alive. The accomplishment of the ring assumes miraculous dimensions, since Browning insists that "there's but one trick . . . one approved device, /And but one" for achieving the correct results. Making a ring, in short, is a matter for an initiate. Like Browning at work in his father's library unearthing art from the past which still sparkles with life, the "artificer" mingles the gold with an alloy only to re-purify the gold once he has formed it; "oh there's re-pristination!" As Browning asserted, his revivals from the past were likewise re-pristinations--purified because filled with the truth of art, the shaping

agent refined away.

The meaning of the ring is built upon the analogies Browning draws. It needs not only the accumulations of past cultures to imitate, it also requires an alloy to make it manageable, a shaper to give it form. Then, "you have a ring." With a consciousness akin to contemporary structuralists and with a similar vocabulary, Browning moves from the ring to the next object:

T'is a figure, a symbol say:  
A thing's sign: now for the thing signified.  
(I, 11. 31-32)

At this point, the poet turns, not actually to the "thing signified" but to another hieroglyph of complementary purpose. Once again, he motions to the object, this time dramatically tossing it aloft:

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss  
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about  
By the crumpled vellum covers, --pure crude fact  
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,  
And brains, high-blooded, ticked for two centuries since?  
(11. 33-37)

As if to emphasize the palpable "reality" of these crude facts, Browning pushes the book at the reader. "Examine it yourselves!," (1. 38) the emblematiser as vendor urges, offering guarantee that it is the genuine article and that our money will be refunded if we remain unconvinced.

The book, like the ring, is an emblem of the past, unearthed by chance among the rubble of discarded, shabby artifacts of daily life, broken households, or rejected fashion:

'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames  
 White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,  
 Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,  
 (Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)  
 Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,  
 Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry  
 Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts  
 In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised!)  
 A wreck of tapestry, proudly-purposed web  
 When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,  
 Now offered as a mat to save bare feet  
 (Since carpets constitute a cruel cost)  
 Treading the chill scagliola bedward: . . .  
 (I, 11. 53-65)

The market, like the tomb which preserved the ancient ring, makes public the private histories of forgotten individuals, details of their homely lives, the fate of their fine tapestries, shards of their outmoded taste, emblems of the past. This is indeed a Victorian impresa, crowned with memorabilia, all capable of generating at least the ragged end of a tale.

From these choices, Browning plucks the book, his treasure from "two centuries since" which, like the ring, has magic power: "The thing's restorative/I' the touch and sight." (11.89-90) Browning glories in his role of hierophant as he brings back from the pages of human life a magic book which he is capable of reading. As proof that he wears the robes of the true magician, he conjures out of the two hieroglyphs the immensely complex truth which constitutes the remainder of the work.

The emblematic moment in Browning's aesthetic philosophy is analogous to the "moment one and infinite" which he celebrates as the high emotional point in human life. As a privileged, condensed instant

of perception it is a Romantic notion which extends from Wordsworth's "spots of time" to Hopkins' inscapes, Pater's intense moments, Hardy's moments of vision up to Joyce's epiphanies. Holman Hunt captured such an instant in his picture "The Awakening Conscience." Evangelical religion emphasized such direct perception of "truth," a moment of conversion. Browning dramatized these instants in Pippa Passes where the innocent song of a girl awakens the conscience of those she passed--so powerful is the unconscious workings of art.

Browning's emblems, never a purely artistic device, insist upon a unity between their truth and ultimate truth and celebrate the artist as hierophant who, like the prophets, may have to sing unheeded by the many. Browning did not disdain to read human nature, that "universal and publick manuscript" in Browne's words, and with great gusto he "sucked divinity from the flowers of nature." His insistence upon using an emblematic vocabulary too often meant that he lost an audience. He explains to Ruskin "You would have me paint plain out which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you."<sup>95</sup> It seems ironically appropriate that Browning is explaining his emblematic "artifices" to John Ruskin, for it was Ruskin's father who defined so beautifully this technique that was Ruskin's as well as Browning's hieroglyphic style: "truth in mosaic."

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<sup>95</sup>W. G. Collingwood, The Life and Work of John Ruskin II (London, 1893), I., p. 200.

## CHAPTER 2

## Troops of Shadows: The Audience Within

Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fullness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be empanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations.

Shelley, A Defence of Poetry

To think of himself as hierophant, prophet, or poet presented at least three difficulties for Browning. All three problems concern validation. To be a real poet he needed to know if his vision was authentic. In order to know this, first the hierophant needs certification. Is the prophet a true one? In the world it is hard to tell a certified visionary from a certified madman. Browning's interest in Christopher Smart, who was both, can partially be explained by this unfortunate combination. Secondly, one must have a true audience. When considered as initiates to whom the hierophant brings his vision, one needs to know if the audience consists of devoted followers or mocking, derisive enemies. As Browning's poems are filled with probable madmen, so they are concerned with an ambiguously dangerous audience. Mediating between these two aspects of the dangerous yet essential bond between speaker and audience is the

form of the message. If the hierophant is not a false prophet, his word must be the correct one. Whatever correctness or truth may mean to the poet, he must emphasize this aspect of his message in order to be accepted. In this regard, Browning insists upon the truth of his poetic vision; The Ring and the Book "proves" that the artist can claim a higher truth than the crude facts are able to supply. To consider the medium of communication, then, becomes one method of establishing his credentials. To dazzle his audience with feats of linguistic legerdemain becomes one of his stances in validating his role as a poet. By tracing some of Browning's images of the artist's ambivalent relationship to the crowd, this chapter examines the problematic nature of his poetic stance in an effort to explain some of the difficulties readers have had with the medium of his message.

As Browning practiced it, the dramatic monologue can be thought of as a paradigm of his situation as a poet. In its form it establishes the terms of a predicament which the poet treated as a theme in narratives, plays, and lyrics. The dramatic monologue turns the ambiguities of communication and the relationship between speaker and auditor into a way of writing poems. A speaker reveals himself, frequently as a fraud, a false priest, a fallen prophet, a fake spiritualist, in front of an auditor whose presence shapes the nature of his speech. Few of Browning's personae are free of an uneasy awareness that their utterance may have as much to do with the silent listener, recorder of their words, validator of their veracity as with their

deepest convictions. In this sense, no word in the poem is entirely independent of the silent witness. The dramatic monologue contains within it an aesthetic tribunal; the speaker stands before a jury, as in an ancient agon, and recites in order to be accepted. Many of the monologues carry this extra sense of special pleading. As Bishop Bloughram argues his case, as Lippo Lippi exposes his needs, as Mr. Sludge, the medium, triumphs not only over his outraged patron but appears to convince himself as well, Browning's spirit hovers over the figures of priest, artist, and occultist asking the audience to accept his own vision.

In all of these pleadings, the reader experiences an inundation of vocabulary, the sheer force and variety of which might be sufficient to confer the mantle of poet upon the creator, even while they may fail to persuade the reader of the actual validity of the argument. Part of the reason for the pressure upon some words comes from a demand that they transcend mere language. In his role as true hierophant, Browning hopes to bring back the reality behind the word. He turns the word into thing and beyond that turns the thing into emblem, the truth beyond the thing. Therefore, if it is the word at first which makes the "trick" possible, the word carried an onerous burden; it must be capable of incarnation.

Paradoxically, a part of Browning's restless pushing of words to their limits is due to his lack of faith in them. They will not do enough; they remain stuck in the mire of the earthly and will not

transcend the stuff out of which they are made. Perhaps a reason for the sheer wordiness of Browning's work as a whole lies in his scepticism about the ultimate efficacy of words. His intense awareness of their inadequacy leads him to employ as much of the linguistic range as he can, to juxtapose levels of usage, and when English fails to borrow words from other languages. Going beyond words, he resorts to soundings, grunts, growls and groans.

Even language amplified by soundings, however, will not suffice. Browning also turns to other arts to achieve his vision. In fact, one way of understanding the emblematic element in his art is that it is a way of bringing another dimension, an additional power, to the bare word. It is a mode in which seeing complements a purely verbal message. This is true of the other arts as well: as "Cleon" demonstrates, his claim for the other arts as part of his poems is a central element in Browning's case before the jury of his peers.

An aim of Browning's devices is to capture a timeless truth, a vision of which he receives fleetingly and which eludes him before he can grasp it and fix it with words. The frustration of getting it is compounded by the impossibility of getting it down:

Just when I seemed about to learn!  
 Where is the thread now? Off again!  
 The old trick!                    ("Two in the Compagna")

Like other poets who desire to capture an infinite moment, Browning impatiently reaches for words which slip away and refuse to stay still. Like Eliot in Burnt Norton, he wishes to achieve a still point,

a "moment one and infinite" and is struck by the inadequacy of the "tricks" of his craft:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still. (V)

A central poetic stance for Browning thus mirrors his aesthetic predicament. He finds himself on a stage which resembles a defendant's box, facing a host of judges, with only words, most of them used before if not used up--all second hand. He has in mind an immortal band whose company he wants to join. One way he escapes from his dilemma, then is by reaching beyond the verbal arts to the other arts and by trying to incorporate their wordless modes into his own art. More radically than Eliot, who uses the other arts by analogy, Browning turns to the other arts to "get people to hear and see."<sup>1</sup> Because the inclusion of the other arts into his poems represents to Browning a way of claiming authenticity for his "new" vision, a way of validating himself as a poet, the theme of the other arts frequently appears in poems along with an image of the audience. In addition to the other arts as theme, the motif will appear in poems in the character of a practitioner of another art, a musician, a painter, a medium, a grammarian. Browning also claims for himself the robes

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Milsand, 1853, Handbook, p. 207.

of a true prophet, one incarnation of which is Feristah in his volume Ferishtah's Fancies. Nonetheless, the suspicion that he is only a wizard casting momentary spells occurs throughout his work.

Mansoor, the Hierophant was his original title for The Return of the Druses, and Djabal, the fake who claims to be a reincarnation of an original prophet represents another exotic version of a failed prophet. In that early version, the message and the aim of the "saviour" of the Druses are noble and true; it is the claim of the prophet which is phony. "Mr. Sludge, the Medium" might have been written (as, indeed, it was written in other guises) had Robert never met Elizabeth or had Mr. Home, the spiritualist, never come into their lives.

One way of sorting out the multiplicity of contradictory, ambiguous attitudes of Browning in regard to speaker, listener, and medium is to trace the image of the audience, a crowd of faces or presences, as it changes and develops in some of his poems from the first crowd image in Pauline to a final mustering of the troop in the Parleyings. In this chapter, the tracing will not attempt to mention all relevant poems but only to give a map of the image as it relates either to the stance of the speaker or to the inclusion of the other arts. In the subsequent chapters, Cleon as artist of all the arts, Ferishtah as prophet, teller or fables, and, finally Browning, as his composite self-portrait in the Parleyings will be examined.

The crowd first appears in Pauline (1833), a poem deeply

endeavored to Shelley's Alastor<sup>2</sup> and heavily weighted with Romantic themes. Although Browning may have thought of the work as a dramatic piece, like Shelley's Alastor it is clearly allegorical of the poet's mind. Shelley's explanatory Preface could serve equally for Browning's "Fragment of a Confession:"

The poem entitled Alastor may be considered as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind. It represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified . . .<sup>3</sup>

The crowd appears after a reformation of the speaker's imagination. The awakened dreamer bids adieu not only to youthful dreams of perfecting mankind but to every aspect of his young hopes: "my own motives, ends/And aims and loves, and human love went last." (ll. 460-61) Rather than feeling greatly diminished, however, the poet feels a surge of new power. Paradoxically, strength comes not from new aspirations but from absolute nothingness. As he is about to enter his inner inferno, he abandons all hope: "I cast/Hope joyously away." In a movement similar to Satan's in Paradise Lost (I, ll. 249-255), he looks inward to the temple of his soul and finds a ghostly assemblage that is ready to admire without making judgments:

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<sup>2</sup>Frederick A. Pottle, Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts (Chicago, 1923), pp. 34-64.

<sup>3</sup>"Preface" to Alastor, The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed., Neville Rogers II, 1814-1817 (Oxford, 1975), p. 43.

My powers were greater: as some temple seemed  
 My soul, where nought is changed and incense rolls  
 Around the altar, only God is gone  
 And some dark spirit sitteth in his seat.  
 So, I passed through the temple and to me  
 Knelt troops of shadows, and they cried "Hail, king!"  
 "We serve thee now and thou shall serve no more!"  
 (ll. 469-75)

Browning proclaims an end to discipleship and declares his independence. Like Satan, another dark spirit, he is his own master. At this point in his life, his actual audience consisted solely of a few friends and of doting, supportive family who were willing to underwrite the self-proclaimed poet's publication costs. This partly explains the entirely worshipful attitude of the shadowy troop. The shades, minions of an unnamed dark spirit, offer to support the poet.

This scene is strongly reminiscent of the temple scene in Keats's Fall of Hyperion although Browning could not have read it.<sup>4</sup> In that poem, whose theme is creative election, Keats fearfully approaches the altar presided over by Moneta, a dark and veiled presence. Like Keats, the poet in Pauline, at a similar moment in his poetic quest, looks through the incense and makes the grand remark, astonishing in its offhand quality, that "only God is gone / And some dark spirit sitteth on his seat." The dark spirit recalls Milton's Satan; the movement inward reenacts mythic encounters. Browning balances his poetry between the celestial and the infernal, polarities

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<sup>4</sup>Keats's Fall of Hyperion was first published in 1856.

represented by the emblematic images of the dark and the bright orbs in many of his poems. Warring forces of good and evil create a battle ground in an oeuvre which exists in an almost Zoroastrian universe of black and white.

Although he has cast off his earlier dependence, rather than leading to independence, the poet's new surge of power brings a different bondage. He willingly becomes an entirely passive agent, giving himself up to his loyal band. When they offer to worship him, he queries: "'Are ye strong? Let fancy bear me / Far from the past!" And I was borne away." (ll. 477-78) In this new birth, he yields himself "sleeping" to the troop who ask to be controlled and yet appear to control the poet.

In the midst of his passive acquiescence to the troop of shadows, Browning interjects a troublesome thought. Like Keats, who is allowed to approach Moneta, the dark presence, but wonders uneasily about his good fortune, the poet worries about his fitness to be worshipped by this troop. He warns them of his other, secret and perhaps unacceptable instincts. Torn between rejoicing at his new power and feeling guilty about his hidden passions, the poet confesses his fear of parts of his own imagination: "And I said "I have nursed up energies, / "They will prey on me." Although the nature of the energies is only suggested, it is clear that he refers to aspects of his own complex and many-faceted self. Even this early in his career, he is acutely aware of the manifold consciousness which

inhabits one body. He continues to worry, in spite of the unquestioning applause of his internal audience:

And a band knelt low  
 And cried "Lord, we are here and we will make  
 "Safe way for thee in thine appointed life!  
 "But look on us!" And I said "Ye will worship  
 Me; should my heart not worship too?" They shouted  
 "Thyself, thou art our King!" (ll. 482-87)

The "Lord" cannot worship wholeheartedly; already Browning divides the self.

In spite of his reluctance, however, this inner troop may be willing to worship their coy master because he has already claimed the other arts for his poetic soul. After an episode in which the guilt-ridden poet has achieved peace after a soul-cleansing, he discovers that, although fallen, his poetic soul, that part which sings, is combined with his love for other arts:

As peace returned, I sought out some new pursuit;  
 And song rose, no new impulse but the one  
 With which all others best could be combined,  
 My life has not been that of those whose heaven  
 Was lampless save where poesy shone out;  
 But as a clime where glittering mountain tops  
 And glancing sea and forest steeped in light  
 Give back reflected the far-flashing sun;  
 (ll. 357-64)

He continues with praise to music and its effect upon art. The glittering reflections of the sun, an image of refraction from the light which shines not only on poetry but on the whole range of artistic expression, dominates as an image for the artistic imagination throughout his poems. Apollo, the welcoming deity of the Parleyings, leads the reader to a visit with representatives of the other arts. In this early

evocation, Browning collects the powers of the arts to help him enter a place where the "dead gather." We encounter these mysterious dead in later poems. Here, Browning suggests that the imagination, with the help of music, can lead the poet to the Elysian fields, or to that place where famous artists live forever:

For music (which is earnest of a heaven,  
Seeing we know emotions strange by it,  
Not else to be revealed,) is like a voice,  
A low voice calling fancy, as a friend,  
To the green woods in the gay summer time:  
And she fills all the way with dancing shapes  
Which have made painters pale, and they go on  
Till stars look at them and winds call to them  
As they leave life's path for the twilight world  
Where the dead gather.       (11. 365-74)

As one committed to poetry, Browning retained his envy of the power of music to do what words could not do. His poems about music both reflect his regard for its powers and quite successfully appropriate that power for the poem.<sup>5</sup>

Browning represents the influence of painting upon his aesthetic soul with a description of Caravaggio's Andromeda, a copy of which hung before him as he wrote.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the conditions of writing reproduce the situation of the emblem writer. Browning looks

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<sup>5</sup> John Hollander, "Robert Browning: The Music of Music"; Wendell S. Johnson, "Browning's Music" JAAC, XXII (1963), 203-207; George Ridenour, "Browning's Music Poems: Fancy and Fact," PMLA LVIII (1963), 369-377 give various ways in which Browning's music poems appropriate the art of music for the poems.

<sup>6</sup> Handbook, p. 44.

at the impresa and, as emblem writer, explains its spiritual significance. The picture of Andromeda becomes emblematic for the permanence of art.<sup>7</sup> It is well to notice that in this case, the subject of the painting is not essential to its emblematic meaning. Browning might have had another picture of a woman before him to make the same point. He addresses the main figure of the impresa:

Andromeda!  
 And she is with me: years roll, I shall change,  
 But change can touch her not--so beautiful  
 With her fixed eyes, earnest and still, --  
 (11.656-59)

Although the myth of Andromeda is a governing one in Browning's imaginative life, as we shall see in a later discussion of "Parleying with Francis Furini," here she is important primarily as a personification of Painting. Thus, Music moves the emotions to places they otherwise might not go and Painting tells of the fixed stillness of eternity: both lead to immortality.

Browning also incorporates the painting into his poem in a more direct fashion. He describes it and the effects that looking at it have on him. In "The Guardian-Angel: A Picture at Fano," which is inspired by Guercino's painting of the same name, he devotes a poem to this technique. In that poem, he explains his method: "I took one thought his picture struck from me, /And spread it out,

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<sup>7</sup>Charles F. Thomas, "St. Jerome in Fra Lippo Lippi and Bishop Bloughram's Apology" Studies in Browning (Spring, 1974), 86-87 suggests that Browning uses paintings as emblematic impresae in other poems.

translating it to song." (VIII, 11. 52-53)

By the time Browning wrote Paracelsus (1835), however, he was beginning to worry that the external, unfamiliar audience, those he could not find within him would not necessarily prove as adulatory as his own familial band. As a failed prophet, Paracelsus is only the first ambiguously authentic hierophant whose aims fit in with those of his creator. Images of the crowd fill this work as part of one of its central concerns: the reception by the world of the vision of Paracelsus, quester after the scattered rays of truth. At first, the crowd is the throng of mankind. The philosopher who is about to meet his destiny imagines life as a great performance, a "pageant" in which he will take a major role. He expresses his mixed feelings about being prominent by the oxymoronic "oppressive joy":

What oppressive joy was mine  
 When life grew plain, and I first viewed the thronged,  
 The everlasting concourse of mankind!  
 Believe that ere I joined them, ere I knew  
 The purpose of the pageant, or the place  
 Consigned me in its ranks--while, just awake,  
 Wonder was freshest and delight most pure--  
 'T was then that least supportable appeared  
 A station with the brightest of the crowd,  
 A portion with the proudest of them all.

(Part I, 11. 448-56)

Whatever great part he is to play in the drama of life, however, Paracelsus realizes that a permanent role in the drama of eternity cannot be easily won. In the next crowd image, the troop of shadows has been externalized and, while not hostile, they are aloof. They cannot be won over so easily. Browning now knows that the quest to

attain poethood may take a lifetime. The audience, as in Shelley's Defence of Poetry, is the group of poets against whom he ultimately will be judged, here figured as a company of "sacred knights:"

I have addressed a frock of heavy mail  
 Yet may not join the troop of sacred knights;  
 And now the forest-creatures fly from me,  
 The grass-banks cool, the sunbeams warm no more.  
 Best follow, dreaming that ere night arrive,  
 I shall o'ertake the company and ride  
 Glittering as they! (Part III, ll. 714-20)

The forest in this passage may be the one "steeped in light" from Pauline, but the "sunbeams warm no more," the rays, light from the true poet, do not shine so easily. The troop of sacred knights have already been consecrated. The hierophant finds himself in the alienated position of belonging to nothing, neither to nature nor to the company. His sacred goal has divided him from natural beings, and although he has addressed himself to the task, he has not yet become a poet like the one in "Kubla Khan" who, with "flashing eyes," inspires holy dread. His own desire to "glitter" with the rays of Apollo keeps him going, and he dreams that he will gain his goal before night comes. As in Pauline, "glittering" suggests the entire range of artistic production.

The dark aspect of the aim to gain attention and glory enters Paracelsus in the guise of rivals, a demonic audience of peers. Paracelsus has accepted his failure, but he knows that he has come close to success. He remembers the aspiration of Phaeton, another seeker of the sun's role. (Part V, ll. 125 ff.) He then rages at those

who called him "the quack, the cheat, the liar." (1.142) Even a true aspirant, it seems, can be destroyed by the calumny of an audience. The entire passage is notable for revealing the enormous threat that being poorly received posed to Browning, a fear which he portrays in images of an infernal crew which tortured the occult priest to the point of death:

What have I done? Fiends dare ask that? or you,  
 Brave men? Oh, you can chime in boldly, backed  
 By the others! What had you to do, sage peers?  
 Here stand my rivals; Latin, Arab, Jew,  
 Greek, join dead hands against me: all I ask  
 Is, that the world enroll my name with theirs,  
 And even this poor privilege, it seems,  
 They range themselves, prepared to disallow.  
 Only observe! Why, fiends may learn from them!  
 How they talk calmly of my throes, my fierce  
 Aspirings, terrible watchings, each one claiming  
 Its price of blood and brain; how they dissect  
 And sneeringly disparage the few truths  
 Got at a life's cost; they too hanging the while  
 About my neck, their lies misleading me  
 And their dead names browbeating me! Grey crew,  
 Yet steeped in fresh malevolence from hell,  
 Is there a reason for your hate? My truths  
 Have shaken a little the palm about each prince?  
 Just think, Aprile, all these leering dotards  
 Were bent on nothing less than to be crowned  
 As we! (Part V, ll. 158-179)

These peering, leering faces return in subsequent poems. The ghostly audience threatens partly because it can erase an aspirant from history. Because he tells his own kind of truth, Paracelsus wants his name enrolled with his hated rivals so that at least he may have a chance to be judged by the "wise of many generations."

As he moved to his next major poem, Browning continues to work out his relationship between the artist, the arts, and the audience.

Perhaps one of the many reasons that Sordello (1840) tortured Browning for so long and one of the reasons that he tortured it was that the poem concerns the growth of a poet, the forming of his language, and his relationship to his judges. Sordello's early poetic education sounds very much like a description of Browning's own isolated but happy experiments with his poetic imagination within the comfortably furnished walls of his library.

Sordello, craving sympathizers, wanting to be understood, wanting to hide, knows that his audience lies within him and that, consequently, he is always before it:

Souls like Sordello, on the contrary,  
Coerced and put to shame, retaining will,  
Care little, take mysterious comfort still,  
But look forth tremblingly to ascertain  
If others judge their claims not urged in vain,  
So, they must ever live before a crowd.

(Book I, ll. 740-45)

At the beginning of the poem and for the first time in his poetry, Browning stands before the audience in his own person. He avers his preference for fading into the audience and watching "in secret" his own creation speak for itself. But he appears not to trust the ability of the audience to understand the words unprompted by the poet who made them. Like the narrator in a commedia del arte<sup>8</sup> and like the speaker in the beginning of The Ring and the Book, he steps out into

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<sup>8</sup>William E. Harrold, The Variance and the Unity (Athens, Ohio, 1973), p. 120.

the light;

Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,  
 Makers of quite new men, producing them,  
 Would best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem  
 The wearer's quality; or take their stand,  
 Motley on back and pointing pole in hand,  
 Beside him. So, for once I face ye, friends,  
 Summoned together from the world's four ends,  
 Dropped down from heaven or cast up from hell,  
 To hear the story I propose to tell.

(Book I, 11. 26-34)

Browning again recognizes the celestial/infernal dialectic of artistic creation. Again, he knows that his true audience consists of "few living, many dead;" and it is primarily to the shades that he addresses himself. Not only does he wish to control what the audience sees, but he also wishes to control the composition of the audience itself, dead as well as living. He hopes he can muster his own host and that they will prove friendly:

Say, but few  
 Friends fate accords me? Here they are: now view  
 The host I muster! Many a lighted face  
 Foul with no vestige of the grave's disgrace;  
 What else should tempt them back to taste our air  
 Except to see how their successors fare?  
 My audience! (Book I, 11. 43-49)

At this moment in the poem, Browning becomes a spiritualist, his own Mr. Sludge, as he conjures spirits from the dead, proclaiming his ability to muster his own host. He worries, nonetheless, about critics and their approval despite his proclamations. Perhaps he is a fake and will fail to raise the proper spirits. Can he quicken only selected poets of the past? Shelley appears, ghostly and admonitory. Browning recoils in fear of this confrontation. He has partly explained, in

Paracelsus, his abandonment of pure, Shelleyan poetry, and yet here acknowledges his abiding awareness of Shelley's ghost as a presence in his imagination:

stay--thou, spirit, come not near  
 Now--not this time desert thy cloudy place  
 To scare me, thus employed, with that pure face!  
 I need not fear this audience, I make free  
 With them, but then this is no place for thee!  
 (Book I, 11. 60-64)

He has tried to conjure up Verona, but Shelley appears instead.

Browning guiltily fears a confrontation with this poet to whom he bears so complex and ambiguous a relationship. Perhaps he fears that it is too early for a contest with this glittering knight, for the image he invokes is that of the battle of Marathon. The ringing diction proclaims a joust of words:

The thunder-phrase of the Athenian, grown  
 Up out of memories of Marathon,  
 Would echo like his own sword's griding screech  
 Braying a Persian shield, --the silver speech  
 Of Sidney's self, the starry paladin,  
 Turn intense as a trumpet sounding in  
 The knights to tilt, --wert thou to hear! What heart  
 Have I to play my puppets, bear my part!  
 Before these worthies? (Book I, 11. 65-73)

Browning feels that he is a "maker of quite new men" not based on Shelley's lyrical model. Shelley, whose Hellas was based on Aeschylus' The Persians, is rejected in favor of a project to reform the language. Therefore, to reeducate his readers, Browning forces himself out of hiding. Even though he claims that he has "many lovers," (1. 43) he fears that he will not measure up to the stature of the "worthies," and he fears their derision. If he loses heart, he loses his

entire artistic enterprise.

The fear and the loss find an unusual figuration in "Pictor Ignotus" from the volume, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845). In that poem, the first of the troop of Italian painters in the Browning canon speaks of his accomplishments measured against his abilities. The painter believes he could have created great and famous pictures which boldly revealed the "truths" of life. In his imagination, the painter dreams of the glory which would have been his had he translated to the canvas his vibrant visions of life's fullness. This reticent artist of "these endless cloisters and eternal aisles" is taken up by his own unacknowledged longings for earthly praise and immortality. At the height of his fantasy, instead of dying and going to heaven, he sees himself lingering "Here on my earth, earth's every man my friend." The thought is "so wildly dear" that it grows "frightful." The fear, arising partly from the word, "friend" and its implied opposite, "enemy," brings on a series of weird and frightening images. Like the instincts of the guilty speaker in Pauline, the precious thought represents one of the energies which preys upon him:

Glimpses of such sights  
 Have scared me, like the revels through a door  
 Of some strange house of idols at its rites!  
 This world seemed not the world it was before:  
 Mixed with my loving trusting ones, there trooped  
 . . . Who summoned those cold faces that begun  
 To press on me and judge me? Though I stooped  
 Shrinking, as from the soldiery a nun,  
 They drew me forth, and spite of me . . . enough!  
 (11. 41-49)

The passage is rich with allusion to other poems. The "house of idols" recalls the temple in Pauline, and the word "trooped" reinforces the allusion. The unwelcome faces recall the grey crew at the end of Paracelsus and the unbidden ghost of Shelley in Sordello. Browning recoils in terror from the dangers attendant upon releasing his deepest imaginings. The coldness of the judging faces suggests not only an unfriendly verdict but also the coldness of death and comes at the very moment that the painter dares to dream of eternal warmth.

The artist, much like Browning, cannot bear the thought of unfriendly critics, and his disgust gives rise to the radical and shocking image of a nun about to be raped by the soldiery. The consequences of the violation of consecrated purity is so terrible that he cannot complete his thought. One can imagine that, for Browning who could assume the role of women in his poems, the violation is felt as deeply personal. This fate is equal to if not worse than death. In fact, the unknown painter chooses ignominious death rather than suffer the intrusive violation of the hordes of critics. For the poet Browning, the choice is not so simple. He knows that to succumb to his fear of rape at the hands of the merchants of the marketplace will lead to the sterile anonymity of the unknown painter. He imagines the fear in the poems as jeering or menacing faces; in his own life he presents himself as a fastidiously dandy public man, while his body of poetry struggles constantly with awareness of the inner multiplicity, contradictions, even indecencies in men and women.

Ten years later, in Men and Women (1855), "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," emphasizes the nightmare aspect of Browning's vision, the dark side which he suggested in other poems.<sup>9</sup> The figure of the knight on a hopeless quest becomes the central theme rather than the isolated image it was in Paracelsus and Sordello. Again in this version, the band is already dead. They watch his performance, judging his fitness to join them:

Thus I had so long suffered in this quest,  
 Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ  
 So many times among 'The Band'--to wit  
 The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed  
 Their steps--that just to fail as they, seemed best,  
 And all the doubt was now--should I be fit?  
 (VII, 11. 37-42)

The triumph at the end of the poem comes when Roland does not fear to blow his horn while the names "of all the lost adventurers, my Peers" become embodied. He faces them shamelessly, unlike the unknown painter, and does not beckon them away as Browning does to Shelley in Sordello. At least he is fit to join them in their failure:

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met  
 To view the last of me, a living frame  
 For one more picture! in a sheet of flame  
 I saw them and knew them all. And yet  
 Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set  
 And blew. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."  
 (XXXIV, 11. 199-204)

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<sup>9</sup>The concept of "Childe Roland" as a poem about Browning's relationship to his audience was suggested by Harold Bloom's readings of this poem, one version of which appeared as "Browning's Childe Roland: All Things Deformed and Broken," Prose I (1970), 29-44.

Roland stands before his audience and plays his song.

The poetic quest requires lifetime heroics. In the poem "Prospice" from Dramatis Personae (1864), Browning advocates facing death heroically, this time in his own person. The figuration of the poem, the journey and the battles, link it to the earlier "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (and to the later "Thamuris Marching"). Like Roland (and Thamuris), Browning wishes to equal his peers in courage. He violently rejects the easier option of creeping past death quietly: "No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers/ The heroes of old." (ll. 17-18)

Browning's awareness of the importance of the immortal peers as the final judgment is fully and vigorously imagined in "Thamuris Marching" from Aristophanes' Apology (1875).<sup>10</sup> This time, a poet is on a quest to overtake his fellows. Here, in a poem which functions almost as a palinode of his earlier nightmare vision at the end of "Childe Roland," the landscape and the band remain the same but have been transformed from an aspect of the grotesque to an aspect of the sublime. The lighting brightens, but the scene remains the same. Thamuris, like Roland, seeks his doom on a specific spot. Unlike Roland, however, he acknowledges from the beginning that he knows where he is going; he "came, saw and knew the spot/Assigned him

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<sup>10</sup>George Ridenour, op. cit., made me aware of this poem, although he uses it in another context.

for his worst of woes that day." (11.114-15)

The potentially ravished landscape remains but is transformed, throwing back its own deformity with a challenge that yields triumph:

Was there a ravaged tree? it laughed compact  
With gold, a leaf-ball crisp, high brandished now,  
Tempting to onset frost which late attacked.

Was there a wizened shrub, a starveling bough,  
A fleecy thistle filched from by the wind,  
A week, Pan's trampling hoof would disallow?

Each, with a glory and a rapture twined  
About it, joined the rush of air and light  
And force: the world was of one joyous mind.

(11.131-139)

Here, as in "Cleon" the predecessors are named. The shadowy band is artistic and is judgmental. The agon as symbol becomes reality. The heroic moment comes from acting and from taking the consequences of the action as Thamuris faces the troops of shadows. Doom turns to triumph as Thamuris takes on the worthiest of poets, the gods, and by so doing joins the immortals in the temple on Parnassus. It is the dream of Pauline realised:

Peerless recorded, since the list grew long  
Of poets (saith Homeros) free to stand  
Pedestalled mid the Muses' temple-throng,

A stuated service, laurelled, lyre in hand  
(Ay, for we see them)--Thamuris of Thrace  
Predominating foremost of the band.

(11.161-166)

In an important passage in Paracelsus (Part I, 11.728 ff.), Paracelsus describes the source of truth as a light within us that is hemmed in by "gross flesh" which he calls "a baffling and perverting carnal mesh."

Paracelsus seeks to find the source of this great inner light and to let it out "ray by ray." This inner truth is also part of external "scattered rays" which the seer collects to create a "wondrous whole." (Part V, 11.681 ff.) At the moment of confronting his place, Thamuris' face bathes in the glory of one ray of light. The radiance comes not only from the morning sun, suggesting Apollo, but it also meets the poet's inner ray:

Therefore the morn-ray that enriched his face,  
If it gave lambent chill, took flame again  
From flush of pride; he saw, he knew the place.

The poet gathers rays of truth, joins them, and gives them back as rays of art. There is no half-heartedness; in "one joyous mind" the world unifies in art, the Sun, and in this artist, Thamuris.

Twelve years later, when Browning thought of writing an autobiography, he fitted the form it would take to his own relationship to his art. Rather than a Prelude, a narrative structure arranged by topic, he thought of real people of past centuries who influenced his growth. Fulfilling a deep wish, the one he dramatized in Sordello, he mustered his own host, seven men who influenced him through their own practice in their various arts. The Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day (1887) does not represent the seven personages but presents Browning talking to them. Included in the group is only one poet, Christopher Smart, but two painters and a musician. Once again, the motifs of audience, crowd and the other arts come together. Browning's feeling that poetry is not enough for

the whole artist is reflected in this final, fleshing-out of a very select band of the troops of shadows. The origin of the title bears an important weight in Browning's aesthetic autobiography. The phrase is from Dante's La Vita Nuova, a poetic autobiography about the connection between love and spiritual salvation. Dante, perhaps as much as Shelley, is responsible for the shape of Browning's oeuvre, so that the allusion is particularly rich.

In order to understand some of the ways that this allusion works in this late work, one must go back to Browning's earlier volume, Men and Women. In "One Word More," the dedicatory epilogue to E. B. B., Browning's Beatrice, the poet brings together the image of the audience, the artist and the theme of the other arts. He presents two great artists, Dante and Raphael, as examples of the desire to create in a mode outside one "chosen" medium in order to express something unique and private.

Browning sets Dante in the midst of creating a unique offering to his great love. Wrapt in the creative act of drawing, "musing, tracing and retracing" the angel he wishes to dedicate to Beatrice, his surroundings fall away, and he is oblivious to everything but his work. According to DeVane, the passage from La Vita Nuova from which Browning drew his information was one of his favorite selections from Dante. Furthermore, the passage is crucial to an understanding of what Browning changed to fit his own conception:

On the day upon which the year was complete since this lady was made one of the inhabitants of the eternal life, I was seated in a place where, having her in mind, I was drawing an angel upon my tablets. And while I was drawing, I turned my eyes and saw at my side certain people of importance. They were looking on what I did, and as I heard afterwards, they had been there some time before I was aware of it. When I saw them, I arose, and greeting them, said, "Another was with me just now, and because of that I was abstracted." And when they had gone away, I returned to my work, that is, of drawing figures of angels; and while I was busy about this the idea came to me of putting words in rhyme, to be an anniversary poem for her, and of addressing those persons who had come to me.<sup>11</sup>

Because it contains suggestions of the motifs of the crowd, the artist and the medium, it is easy to understand Browning's attraction to the passage. Unlike Dante, however, he would find an element of the horrible in the situation of the persons peering over the shoulder of the oblivious artist. In Dante's description, there is no sense that the persons of importance were evil, unwelcome, or intrusive. Dante welcomes them, apologizes for his abstraction and consequent neglect of them. Furthermore, he plans to dedicate the work that arose out of the episode to them. If they do not exactly function as Muses, at least Dante finds the audience beneficial.

Browning alters the aspect of these presences in "One Word More."<sup>11</sup> Like the cold faces pressing in upon the unknown artist in

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<sup>11</sup>From La Vita Nuova, XXXIV Handbook, p. 277.

"Pictor Ignotus," the people of importance have come to harm Dante:

Dante standing, studying his angel, --  
 In there broke the folk of his Inferno.  
 Says he--"Certain people of importance"  
 (Such he gave his daily dreadful line to)  
 "Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet."  
 Says the poet--"Then I stopped my painting."  
 (11. 44-49)

According to Browning, they are evil people, and as he thinks about his fear of prying eyes, not the least of their sins in their intrusion. They have been watching uninvited. It is bad enough that an artist has to be seen at all, but the horror of being watched when one thinks oneself alone cannot be forgiven. In "House" in the Pacchiarotto volume (1876) Browning vents his fury at those who would invade his privacy. In this poem, he has Dante take revenge by hurling the invaders into Inferno.

The certain people perpetrate the further sin of stifling Dante's creativity. In La Vita Nuova, Dante unambiguously states that he resumed drawing as soon as the people had departed. In Browning's poem, however, the intrusion "stopped my painting" forever:

You and I will never see that picture.  
 While he mused on love and Beatrice,  
 While he softened o'er his outlined angel,  
 In they broke, those 'people of importance.'  
 We and Bice bear the loss for ever.  
 (11. 53-57)

Repetition of the verb "broke" emphasizes its importance; the people of importance break in and break the artist's work. The broken reverie cannot be fixed. To destroy a work is a kind of murder, and once again, recalls the infernal faces of the grey crew in Paracelsus.

The crucial role of the audience in Browning's mind is emphasized in this poem by what otherwise would be an irrelevant section. Moses, as deliverer of a crowd, the artist as prophet, enters the poem (Section IX). His own portrait of the artist as Browning in the Parleyings includes elements of the priest, magician, painter, musician and poet and in Ferishtah's Fancies the artist appears as dervish. In this regard, the appearance of Moses in "One Word More" is a Protean transformation of artist into prophet. Moses, like Sordello, performs before a crowd. Even though he smote the rock, thereby giving life to the throng, the crowd "stood and mocked," "drank and sneered." They are ungrateful and make the life of a prophet difficult. He carries bitterness within and, at the moment of "achievement"--when he is about to perform again--he

Sees and knows again those phalanxed faces,  
Hears, yet one time more, the 'customed prelude  
"How shouldst thou, of all men, smite and save us?"  
(11. 90-92)

One pictures Browning, like Moses, even after success has welcomed him, about to perform before his internal assemblage, seeing the phalanxed, cold faces about to sneer and mock him.

His poems remain the only way he can prove himself, although he had been attracted to the other arts and had practiced them when his writing seemed unfruitful. Browning's lack of a "symmetrical education" (the phrase is Pound's about Eliot) enabled him to range a bit more freely within the confines of traditional Western education. His most regular tutoring was in music, and his drawing was taken quite

seriously by his father, a lapsed artist himself. Thus, his own proclivities would respond to Raphael's attempts at writing sonnets and Dante's painting of angels. Browning consecrates his life to poetry in "One Word More," but he conceived of himself as poet of all the arts.

His late return, in the Parleyings, to his thoughts about the "certain people of importance" represents a gathering together of these three major concerns of Browning. As an old man he reconsiders his relationship to the audience, to his medium, and to the various guises of his complex, many-faceted self. He has come to terms with the presence of these "others." Although he knows that the dark elements cannot be banished, he has used these energies which prey on him as internal adversaries to shape his poetry. Browning suspected what Rilke knew; internal demons and angels are the Muses of art. The Parleyings is a final mustering of the troops of shadows. One sees the band, "a living frame for one last picture" as the aged poet sings before the fellows he is about to join.



he fully face the possibility that to have arrived later may instead mean to have declined, to be diminished.<sup>1</sup> He darkly suspects, however, that there may be only decadence in the arts and in civilization. Hence an awareness of the problem of following "those divine men of old time" (1.95) is implicit in every argument; he grows weary as he contemplates the past and horrified as he looks to the future.<sup>2</sup>

In regard to the past, Cleon's consolation is that his mind is "greater. . . since more composite:" (1.64-65) he solves his aesthetic problem by cultivating diversity in the arts rather than by trying to surpass the formidable accomplishments of his predecessors. Nonetheless, he finds that in spite of their greater simplicity, the forerunners retain their grandeur. It seems to him that there is nothing left for him to do. In spite of his boasting, anguished questioning creeps into his tone: "Was the thing done? --Then, what's to do again?" (1.81) He is driven to name his measure, those dreaded ancients who haunt him:

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<sup>1</sup>W. Jackson Bate, The Burden of the Past and the English Poet (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970) documents the awareness of this burden for nineteenth century poets in general.

<sup>2</sup>The "frame" of Browning's Balaustion's Adventure indicates that the concern and awareness of a writer who follows great literary figures was a theme which Browning consciously worked with. The epigraph to this chapter might be transposed to fit both Browning and his fictional Cleon as well as being appropriate to Euripides.

I have not chanted verse like Homer, no--  
 Nor swept string like Terpander, no--nor carved  
 And painted men like Phidias and his friend:  
 I am not great as they are, point by point.  
 But I have entered into sympathy  
 With these four, running these into one soul,  
 Who, separate, ignored each other's art. (11.139-45)

The negatives, "no," "nor," and "not," hammer through the lines like the gravel of a stern aesthetic tribunal. Cleon's solution, the blending of all arts into one soul, is tenuous at best, and he knows it. The pleading tone of his question, "Say, is it nothing that I know them all?" (1.145), betrays his unease. "Nothing" is the longest and only polysyllabic word in the line, and, as the culmination of the negatives, is the theme of Cleon's complaint. His despair stems from the dual fear that there is nothing left for him to do and that there is nothing after death.

In this dual meaning of "nothing" resides the peculiar double-ness of the poem. For Browning, to face an audience with old "tricks" means to face ridicule or, worse, to fail to achieve immortality. In the Christian theme of the poem, to face death with nothing but pagan belief is to fail to achieve salvation. "Cleon" speaks both to the religious and to the artistic extinction which worried Browning.

Readers of "Cleon" have interpreted it as a religious poem, companion-piece to "An Epistle of Karshish,"<sup>3</sup> and it partly belongs

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<sup>3</sup>Ruh, Nancy B., "New Perspectives on the Companion Poems of Robert Browning," Victorian Newsletter 36 (Fall, 1969), 5-9 traces complimentary image patterns in the two poems.

in that category. It is a fable in which the speaker misses the truth of which the reader is aware. Cleon awaits a savior from death but rejects him out of snobbery. Hence, on this level of the poem, a duality exists within the point of view which culminates in the irony at the end of the poem, where it is implied that all sane men accept the truth of Christian redemption which Cleon rejects as madness.

The duality of the point of view is reflected in the dual subject of the poem which also has both a religious and an aesthetic theme. Not only does "Cleon" represent the inability of the Greek civilization to accept a transcendent deity, but it also compares the ancient Greek's failure with the Romantic and Victorian poets' inability to achieve a transcendent vision. This implicit comparison between ancient Greece's loss of heaven and nineteenth-century England's loss of joy becomes the focus of the poem and unites the various strands of the poem in the common theme of temporality. Immortality for the artist with the gods on Parnassus is equally important for this poem as immortality for the soul in a Christian heaven.

In considering the complex interrelationships which contribute to the significance of the poem, it is helpful to use the concept of the emblematic portrait. As has been argued in a preceding chapter, Browning worked with abstract ideas of nobility, of nationality, and of historical periods while at the same time he shaped a fully realistic character. "Cleon," too, can be regarded as one of these many-layered portraits. His characterization at once depicts a historical period, that

of post-classical Greece, and represents a portrait of an artist, late-arriving, like Browning, who wishes to practice all arts. In the sense that the aspirations of Browning himself are part of the portrait, it is more personal a portrayal than some other monologues. Nonetheless, Browning has enriched and glossed the portrait with hieroglyphs which elaborate upon the subject of the poem and guide the reader through some of its complexities. Thus, the poem at once describes an ars poetica and exemplifies it.

Browning's relationship to his persona fluctuates and enables him to maintain a dual relationship to it. On the one hand, Cleon's snobbery and intolerance for the "mere barbarian Jew" define his distance from his creator. On the religious level, Browning views Cleon ironically and critically. In terms of the aesthetic theme, on the other hand, there is little distance between Browning and his persona. Despite its classification as a religious poem, most of the lines in "Cleon" are devoted to questions of art and the artist in relation to his times and to Time itself. To read the poem as primarily directed to the irony at the end is to ignore the serious and relevant questions Browning asks about his own art in relation to the artist in the mid-nineteenth century. The parallels between the predicaments of Cleon and Robert Browning can hardly be coincidental. Cleon expresses the same ambivalence toward his civilization that characterizes Browning's feeling about his. There is the same confidence in contemporary advances, but, as with Victorian optimism, that faith is overshadowed

by deep anxiety and doubt that somehow present achievement could never compensate for what had been lost.

Browning was surely self-deceived when he claimed, in 1842, that his poems were "always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."<sup>4</sup> Rather than a truly dramatic poet, he is a "masker" in an old sense of the word, and his achievement places him as first of the modern maskers, followed by Wilde, Yeats, Pound, and many of their successors.

Tennyson and Arnold, as two significant contemporary poetic voices, may be viewed partly as Browning's "rivals" in terms of poetic fame. Considering the ambivalence with which Browning regarded his audience, they can also be thought of as wordless judges. These actual poets take the place of the rivals in Paracelsus where the angry philosopher believes that his rivals, "Latin, Arab, Jew, Greek" challenge and oppose him and yet wishes that his name be enrolled with theirs. It is useful to cast Arnold and Tennyson in this oppositional role and to consider how their pressure may have contributed to the shape of Browning's "Cleon" and the poetic which it offers. Both Tennyson and Arnold had written poems in a dramatic mode using a Greek setting. Furthermore, these two particular rivals addressed themselves in their Greek dramatic poems to the

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<sup>4</sup>Advertisement in Bells and Pomegranates No. III, "Dramatic Lyrics."

problems of loss, both personal and social, in ways that are pertinent to Browning's use of a Greek speaker and to his theme of temporality.

Tennyson is less a direct influence upon the poem than Arnold. Nonetheless, his classical poems of the 1830's provide impetus for the making of "Cleon." For example, in Tennyson's dramatic monologue, "Ulysses," the restless hero faces his own decline and his undiminished desire. Ulysses finds that the successful quest for home and the faithful Penelope yields only crushing ennui. Penelope, more desired in the quest than in its fulfillment, has been reduced to an "aged wife," and "meting and doling laws unto a savage race" evokes in Ulysses the revulsion of a man who finds himself alienated in his own land, a revulsion that will later drive Arnold's Empedocles into the crater. Like Cleon, Ulysses is possessed with insatiable longing for a fuller life: "I am become a name / For always roaming with a hungry heart." The experience yet to come gleams on the horizon. One life is not enough:

Life piled on life  
Were all too little, and of one to me  
Little remains. (11.24-26)

In explaining the circumstances of the genesis of "Ulysses," Tennyson observes that "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses' which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. It was more written with the feeling of this loss upon me than many poems of In Memoriam."<sup>5</sup> In addition

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1969), p. 560.

to strong feelings of grief and loss, Tennyson confronts his fear of the brevity of life. The sudden death of Hallam at the beginning of his journey becomes a loss not only of a dear friend but also robs the mourner of his youthful illusion of life's limitless possibilities. To counteract despair, he proposes an heroic solution: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Browning, too, profoundly understood boundless aspirations limited by eventual death. The regular chiming of "eventual" in the poem announces not only the event of Christ's death and resurrection as opposed to Cleon's fear but also suggests the eventuality of death for everyone. The utter unavoidability of death fills Protus and Cleon with dread. Cleon voices the horror of this imagining:

I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,  
The man who loved his life so over-much,  
Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible . . . (ll. 321-23)

The repetition of "I" catches the shocked disbelief of the being contemplating his own non-being.

In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson explores the opposite solutions to the problem of eventual death and loss expressed in "Ulysses": dream, enjoy, yield. In this languorous poem, Tennyson turns away from heroic answers and seeks a way to achieve joy--a key word in "Cleon."<sup>6</sup> The inner spirit of the Lotus-Eaters sings "There is no

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<sup>6</sup>Park Honan, Browning's Characters (New Haven, 1961), p. 215 points out the recurrence of the word "joy" but gives a different interpretation of its significance.

joy but calm!" There is no point in striving because nothing will survive:

What is it that will last?  
All things are taken from us, and become  
Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past. (11. 90-92)

The past may be dreadful, but perhaps there is nothing better. The poem vacillates between retreat and confrontation in regard to memory. Thus, the presentation of the funeral urn embodies this ambivalence. In one mood, it is "sweet":

To muse and brood and live again in memory,  
With those heaped faces of our infancy  
Heaped over with a mound of grass,  
Two handfuls of white dust shut in an urn of brass!  
(11. 110-13)

Sweetness has here the over-ripe quality usually associated with Swinburne's use of the word and suggests decadence.

Cleon, however, cannot manage this languid half-acceptance of his urn. He shrinks in horror even from imagining his being reduced to ashes in an urn. In seeking to solve the dilemma of the disparity between capacity and desire, he rejects the idea that living as a memory--in anyone's memory--is living at all.<sup>7</sup> What if Sappho and Aeschylus "live" in their works? Life for Cleon, as for his creator, must be total; it must involve all the senses. Deliberately

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<sup>7</sup>Edward C. McAleer, "Browning's Cleon and Auguste Comte," *Comparative Literature*, 8 (1956), 142-45, discusses Positivist philosophy which proposed immortality as living in memory and which Browning seems to be answering here.



had published his "Empedocles" in 1852 and had withdrawn it the following year because it revealed too unmitigated a despair. Furthermore, the despair was too modern. As Arnold explained in the "Preface to the First Edition of Poems" (1853), by the time of Empedocles the early Greek characteristics of calm, cheerfulness, and disinterested objectivity have disappeared: "the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust."<sup>9</sup> For these reasons and because the poem did not inspire "joy," a word which serves as a leitmotif in Browning's "Cleon," Arnold withdrew the work only to reprint it "at the request of a man of genius . . . Mr. Robert Browning."<sup>10</sup>

Arnold's poem, though dramatic in form and Greek in setting, transparently speaks to contemporary Victorian issues, a fact which was noted before the poem was published. J. C. Sharp, a friend of Arnold, wrote to Clough in 1849 and impatiently observed that "'Empedocles' seemed to be not much about the man who leapt into the crater--but his name and outward circumstances are used for the drapery of his [Arnold's] own thoughts. I wish Matt would give up that old greek form."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Matthew Arnold, Poems of Matthew Arnold, ed. Kenneth Allott (London, 1965), p. 591.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

Browning, who worked more extensively with garb of all sorts, must have seen the contemporary references in Arnold's poem and had them in mind when he framed "Cleon." In self-imposed exile like Empedocles, Browning muses over his own poetic position in a politically and religiously troubling time. Empedocles anticipates Cleon's problem, if not Browning's solution:

No thou art come too late, Empedocles!  
 All the world hath the day and must break thee,  
 Not thou the world. With men thou canst not live.  
 Their thoughts, their ways, their wishes are not thine,  
 And being lonely thou art miserable,  
 For something has impaired thy spirits' strength  
 And drew its self-sufficing fount of joy.  
 (Act II, 11. 15-21)

Alienation mingled with nostalgia connects Arnold's work to some poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge--particularly Tintern Abbey, the Immortality Ode and "Dejection: An Ode"--in which loss of joy is a major theme. In the foregoing passage, Arnold gives the relatively simple diagnosis that his misery arose because he was out of step with the world at that time. If he had been born earlier, supposedly he would not have suffered. Looking backward, Empedocles sees a past when hope and joy were still possible and men had not given up belief in favor of superstition.

By deepening the dilemma, Browning adds complexity to it. On the one hand, Cleon feels a nagging sense that he has been born too late and that the "thing"--the word is left deliberately vague--had already been done. On the other hand, he wants to feel that he lives in better times; his mind works better. Paradoxically, his very per-

fection is inextricable from decay, of which his horror at dying forever is only the final example. Victorian interest in evolutionary progress lies behind Cleon's conviction that he is a superior species, much as the "suave plum" had improved over the "savage-tasted drupe." Culture, biologically speaking, has not only perfected the grapes, the honey bee, and the flowers, but, curiously, and in the same way, it has also affected woman herself, though Browning leaves the reader to speculate in what ways:

That young and tender crescent moon, thy slave,  
Sleeping above her robe as buoyed by clouds,  
Refines upon the women of my youth. (ll. 135-37)

Cleon, if too old to participate in the perfection of the new generation, is not too old to appreciate them. His frustration lies in the disparity between his growing wisdom and desire on the one hand and his declining physical powers on the other.

Furthermore, if one reads the poem with Arnold in mind, one can understand why Browning wanted to reinstate the joy that for Arnold had vanished. Arnold saw with horror that his Empedocles (whose conception owes much to Lucretius as well) was incapable of the only sustaining emotion, joy: "Joy and the outward world must die/As they are dead to me." He recoiled from his poem and drove it from his oeuvre with the sense that he had violated and betrayed his primary maxim of poetry. Following Romantic poetic theory, Arnold carefully explains in his Preface a theory of poetry that Browning transforms in his poem:

It is demanded not only that it [poetry] should interest but also that it should inspire and rejoice the reader . . . For the Muses, as Hesiod says, were born that they might be a forgetfulness of evils, and a truce from cares, and it is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. "All art," says Schiller, "is dedicated to Joy and there is no higher and no more serious problem than how to make men happy. The right art is that alone which creates the highest enjoyment." <sup>12</sup>

Arnold's own answer was to hope to find a way to moderate his joy, to fit it into the bounds of mortality and the possible. Like Carlyle, he wished to increase the Fraction of Life not so much by increasing the Numerator as by lessening the Denominator. <sup>13</sup> Although ambivalent about his solution, Arnold seemed at least partly willing to let joy dim rather than yield to despair. He found, to his sorrow, that his Denominator was his Muse and by reducing her, he lost her.

For Browning, moderation is not possible. In fact, the word hardly appears in his poetry. His longings are too exuberant and intense, and his Muse suffers from excess. His problem in relation to Arnold's poem is to restore enjoyment and at the same time to accommodate despair.

Hearing the pealing of "joy" in Arnold's preface and poem, Browning picks up the song and sets it to his own purposes. Since it carries in it the force of the Romantic poetic, it is a charged word.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 592.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 171 quoted from Carlyle's Sartor Resartus.

Browning respects and uses its power. A touchstone of Browning's "joy" is the final stanza of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," a poem rooted in the sorrow at the passing fullness and beauty of life. Melancholy "dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die:/And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips/Bidding adieu." Cleon enlarges upon this theme:

Thou diest while I survive?  
 Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,  
 In this, that every day my sense of joy  
 Grows more acute, my soul (intensified  
 By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;  
 While every day my hairs fall more and more,  
 My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase--  
 The horror quickening still from year to year,  
 The consummation coming past escape  
 When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy--  
 (ll. 308-17)

Up to this point in the poem, the joy is the same as Keats's, an earthly bliss. For both Browning and Keats, it is the poet whose "strenuous tongue/Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine." The powerful poet, combining strength and fine sensibility, knows most about joy and its concomitant pain. By the end of "Cleon," however, Browning has recast Keats's insight and has redefined the meaning of joy.

One way of understanding "Cleon" in relation to its poetic milieu, both in its Romantic heritage and its Victorian alliances, is by considering the changes in the concept of joy. Browning has taken a key Romantic word and has restored to it some of its traditional Christian implications. Thus, in the word itself one finds the recon-

ciliation of the religious and the aesthetic theme. This reconciliation is the core of the poem on all its levels. It partially distinguishes Browning as a Victorian poet. His ars poetica, as he represents it in the emblems of the poem, is a hybrid, evolved from the poets who constitute his audience and his judges and from his own efforts to reconcile them with his own (unconventional) Christian beliefs.

At the beginning of the poem, "joy" signifies the power of the artist which animates life and gives it meaning; the poet is he "whose song gives life its joy." (1.21) Cleon analyzes his considerable contributions as an artist to the joy of the world. The word then reappears when Cleon has to face the irony of his increased joy-making power at the moment of its total extinction in death:

('t is no dream--  
 We know this, which we had not else perceived)  
 That there's a world of capability  
 For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,  
 Inviting us; and still the soul craves all,  
 And still the flesh replies, "Take no jot more  
 "Than ere thou clombst the tower to look abroad!  
 "Nay, so much less as that fatigue has brought  
 "Deduction to it." We struggle, fain to enlarge  
 Our bounded physical recipiency,  
 Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,  
 Repair the waste of age and sickness: no,  
 It skills not! 'life's inadequate to joy,  
 As the soul sees joy, tempting life to take. (11.237-50)

In comparison to the unconscious, unquestioning enjoyment in the natural world, human joy, because conscious of itself, is at once greater and more burdensome. As Joy climbs up the evolutionary ladder beyond natural man, Browning contemplates the disparity between men's joy and God's. The difference appears to be solely in

degree and not in kind, in quantity and not in quality. The analogy of the garden fountain (l. 251 ff.) illustrates the proportion: Men's joy "is just a thread of the great river" of God's joy.

Towards the end of the poem, Browning repeats the word "joy" in a kind of litany as he aims for the transcendent point, the intersection where he separates himself from Cleon and Keats and points to a poetic which includes traditional Christian connotations of the word "joy." Cleon muses hopefully about the possibility of an after-life. As if he is chanting a charm, he repeats "joy" twice and then broadens it to "joy-hunger." Next, he repeats the word "strait," a reminder of the narrow road to the celestial life:

For joy, as this is in desire for joy,  
 --To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us:  
 That, stung by straitness of our life, made strait  
 On purpose to make prized the life at large--  
 Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,  
 We burst there as the worm into the fly (ll. 327-32)

Browning bursts Keats's grape of joy; the images include a Christian component. The worm releases the fly; the caterpillar turns into the butterfly. These metamorphoses have traditionally represented a transcending of the bonds of natural order. By calling up a traditional emblem of the soul, the butterfly, Browning reminds us that the origins of Romantic joy are religious. For his own poem he signals a return to a more religious poetic, one in which the religious and the aesthetic themes are combined.

With reference to this interpenetration of the religious and the aesthetic themes, the final line of the poem gains in meaning by a

curious reversal. Although Browning no doubt meant the scornful line ironically to turn upon the speaker and to reflect his unwillingness to accept the irrational, the word, "sane" echoes with John Stuart Mill's stringent evaluation of the young Browning's first and intensely confessional poem, Pauline. Mill--in whom irrational forces warred with his strictly rational, utilitarian upbringing--observed, "With considerable poetic powers, the writer seems to me possessed with a more morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being."<sup>14</sup> Since Mill's criticism deeply mortified Browning who next retreated to history, a less personal poetic mode, it would not be too much to suppose that the charged word, "sane," should be stored, rankling in his mind.<sup>15</sup> It is particularly affecting to find the word surfacing in a new guise in the climactic irony of "Cleon." In a sense, "Their doctrine could be held by no sane man" gives the lie to Mill, who, like Cleon, is blind to a kind of non-rational truth. In the case of Mill, the object

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<sup>14</sup>N. Hall Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (London, 1910), p. 59.

<sup>15</sup>Browning kept the phrase in his mind and altered it somewhat in an early letter to Elizabeth. He changes the word "morbid" to "deeper" which then emphasizes his sensitivity. He quotes Mill as an example of an unsolicited "friend:" "for is there not somewhere the little book I first printed when a boy, with John Mill, the metaphysical head, his marginal note that 'the writer possesses a deeper self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being.'" The word "sane" remains. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, ed. Elvan Kintner (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969), p. 28.

of his prejudice is the true poet, Robert Browning, and in the case of Cleon, it is the true God. Thus by connecting his poetic fortune with his ability to communicate transcendent truth, he too is an incarnation.

Browning struggled with the difficulty of accommodating his vision of transcendent truth to the particularized, the earthly, and the earthy which so delighted him without losing the spiritual on the one hand or the fleshly on the other. To do this, he turns to old traditions and to the other arts. Some of the mature results of this turning can be seen in "Cleon."

Cleon is Browning in his almost insatiable zest for experience, his fear of having his accomplishments unrecognized, and his solution to aesthetic problems. Browning pointed to the similarity between himself and his Greek multi-faceted artist when he announced to his friend Milsand what he had attempted in Men and Women, the volume published in 1855 which includes "Cleon." "I am writing," he explained, "--a first step towards popularity for me--lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see."<sup>16</sup> He clearly wished to attract an audience through his alliance with the other arts, but he neglected to declare the depth of his intentions. Is it to be union or merely amicable co-habitation? If he meant the latter, a simple use of musical and artistic themes, he was referring to eight or nine poems out of a collection of fifty-one--hardly a high proportion, regardless of

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<sup>16</sup>Handbook, p. 207.

the undoubted importance of these poems in the collection. Beyond the thematic use of other arts, however, Browning seems to have in mind his particular approach to poetry. He was drawing upon methods of the other arts, a mode which allies him with Cleon and which differentiates his dramatic monologues from the dramatic poems of Tennyson and Arnold.

His aim, as he vaguely puts it, "To get people to hear and see" strongly suggests parallels between himself and Ruskin in their characteristic blending of aesthetic and morally didactic purposes. Ruskin, with his exhortation to his Victorian public to "see," admired Browning for his ability to create portraits of the past. These two Victorians share deep affinities, one of which is their commitment to the morally regenerative power of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, Browning brought visual traditions into his poetry and imported ways of making images from pictorial traditions. Ruskin responded to this aspect of Browning. Addressing a group of art students in 1858, Ruskin preached an aesthetic which took for granted the unity of painting and poetry. He illustrates maxims by drawing equally from the two arts. To demonstrate a point, he read from "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church,"<sup>17</sup> a poem in which architecture and tombs serve as emblems of the values of the Bishop and his era.

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<sup>17</sup>John Ruskin, Works, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1903-12), XVI, p. 458.

"Cleon" is an ars poetica for Browning's emblematic poetry. The Greek artist not only describes Browning's own aims in art and longings to transcend Time, but the poem also demonstrates Browning's emblematic technique. Thus, the poem breaks free from its rivals in Greek garb and stands "alone" as its persona courageously avers. Browning asserts that, like Euripides, he may be a decadent, but he is also born of the gods.<sup>18</sup>

In order to accomplish these various functions, Browning draws upon the emblem tradition, an apt one in that it had already accomplished an aesthetic blending. Furthermore, it allied him with a rich and ancient past, full of religious and occult overtones. In an age which was becoming increasingly aware of the potential for didactically moral poetry inherent in the emblem tradition, which was publishing facsimile editions of seventeenth-century emblem books and which favored symbolic mementoes in its parlours, Browning employed emblematic

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<sup>18</sup>The speeches in Balaustion's Adventure about Euripides' difficulty in being recognized by his own people are infused with the understanding of Browning who suffered from similar coolness by the "British Public," as he termed them in The Ring and the Book:

As certain few that (wisest they of all)  
Had, at first summons, oped heart, flung door wide  
At the new knocking of Euripides,  
Nor drawn the bolt with who cried "Decadence!  
And, after Sophokles, be nature dumb!"  
Such, --and I see in it God Bacchos' boon  
To souls that recognized his latest child,  
He who himself, born latest of the Gods,  
Was stoutly held imposter by mankind, --  
Such were in safety:

(11. 156-165) Balaustion's Adventure.

methods to enhance and enrich the tableaux of his dramatic portraits. By means of an ancient, established, and newly-revived mode of expression, the monologues could usurp the priority of the "ancient men of old time." The emblem tradition traced its ancestry to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, and by using this emblem heritage, Browning enlists its support. As if by adopting an earlier tradition, he was also importing its freshness, his poems seem simultaneously old and new.

The emblems in "Cleon" embody the paradox of time embedded in the concept of tradition. The chequer-work pavement (l. 12), the sphere (l. 100), and the flower (l. 150) serve as emblems exemplifying Browning's aesthetic/spiritual poetic. They are all--even the flower--products of man's artistry. The mosaic pavement becomes associated with the earthly elements of the poetry, the body of art; Browning points to evolutionary mankind as analogy. The sphere, whole and unchanging, stands for the spirit or soul and the vision of the artist who knows of its reality. Soul, that necessary spiritual ingredient, is at the center of Browning's artistic purpose. The flower represents a synthesis of the two and stands for Browning's own poetry. As the images progress, they become figuratively more dimensional and complex. Hence, they are representations of an evolved (Browning might say "improved") artist.

The first image, "the chequer-work/Pavement, at once my nation's work and gift," occurs early in the poem and then recurs (l. 82) as an elaboration of the argument. The floor itself, composite

like the evolved mind of Cleon, represents a development over the past. Moreover, since it combines various shapes and colors, it stands for Cleon's other works "in all these varicolored kinds." (l. 160) Browning may have known that "emblemata" meant "mosaic," and he may be playing upon the reference. If he was not consciously drawing upon Alciati, which was in his library, he may have known about the emblematic use of the floor as a conceit.

Herbert's "The Church-floore" is a literary analogue for this practice. In Herbert, the various colors of the floor are hieroglyphs for virtues that Herbert celebrates. The command for the reader's attention evokes the emblematic convention:

Mark you the floore? that square & speckled stone,  
                                   Which looks so firm and strong,  
                                   Is Patience:  
 And th' other black and grave, wherewith each one  
                                   Is checker'd all along,  
                                   Humilitie: <sup>19</sup>

In Browning's poem, seemingly more realistic, the emblematic elements are highlighted, much in the manner of realistically depicted but nonetheless allegorical painting in which the carefully drawn objects bear upon the meaning of the main figure as a further expansion of the theme. In this way, psychological complexity can be figured and deepened. Like Herbert in "The Church-floore," Browning does not merely present the floor as a figure for advanced creative variety, but

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<sup>19</sup>The Works of George Herbert, ed., F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 66.

he returns to it and gives the text. As in emblem literature, the impresa itself cannot stand alone. Its meaning is in no way obvious without textual interpretation. The poet, by giving out the special reading, becomes one of the elect. Thus Cleon acts as interpreter and supplier of the text. As Herbert does in "The Church-floore," he gestures to the object he is about to explicate and commands the reader's attention:

See, in the chequered pavement opposite,  
 Suppose the artist made a perfect rhomb,  
 And next a lozenge, then a trapezoid--  
 He did not overlay them, superimpose  
 The new upon the old and blot it out,  
 But laid them on a level in his work  
 Making at last a picture; there it lies. (11.82-88)

This is the picture on the page of the emblem book as we have watched the "artist" make it and then stand back, as it were, and point to it: "there it lies." Up to this point in the emblem, the poet carefully describes what Panofsky would call the "primary or natural subject matter," the pure forms, recognized by the analyst of these forms as artistic motifs.<sup>20</sup> The geometry of the object and the "scientific" objectivity lend a level of abstraction which prepares for the sphere and relates one object in the impresa to another. Cleon, as emblem writer, provides the soul of meaning for the body of the image, thereby gaining for himself a privileged position as one of the divines:

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<sup>20</sup> Studies in Iconology (1939; rpt. New York, 1972), p. 5.

So, first the perfect separate forms were made,  
 The portions of mankind: and after, so,  
 Occurred the combination of the same.  
 For where had been a progress, otherwise?  
 Mankind, made up of all the single men, --  
 In such a synthesis the labour ends. (11.89-94)

The emblem itself expresses the special role of the artist since it illustrates and emphasizes the relationship between art and human progress. The artist builds upon the materials (and the matter) worked out by earlier craftsmen and then improves upon them. The pure forms must be created before the mosaicist can make his picture. By "portions of mankind" Browning means "some whole man of the heroic age" (l. 70) who might have been a perfect poet or a perfect philosopher. "The combination of the same" is a later stage of mankind, men who have a "greater mind than our forerunners, since more composite." Browning ties the idea of evolutionary progress to the progress of the late-arriving artist. By these means, he implicitly recognizes that the later artist's work contains within it the perfect forms of the early masters. His own poetry exemplifies the mosaic emblem, combining earlier creations and superimposing later personalities without, however, blotting the earlier ones out. Furthermore, he suggests here, as he does in many poems with musical themes, that artistic shapes--in this case, geometric forms--correspond to historical human realities.

The figure of the sphere is another geometric shape, but it is from solid rather than from plane geometry. It reconciles the aesthetic theme with the spiritual theme by representing soul. More than

the emblem of the floor, it carries with it rich associations from earlier centuries; Renaissance (and earlier) concepts of correspondences, the heavenly spheres, macrocosm and microcosm. In particular, the image recalls Donne, a poet whom Browning read carefully and well before it was fashionable to do so.<sup>21</sup>

Donne's "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," if not a direct source, provides a particularly rich analogue for the tradition Browning invokes in his sphere emblem. The subject of death and resurrection in Donne's poem is pertinent to Cleon's own predicament in refusing the possibility of resurrection with its promise of eternal life. The sphere is used as an image of eternity and as an emblem of the soul. The language in Cleon's explication of his sphere echoes the carefully reasoned argument of Donne's colloquy. In Donne's poem, the first line presents the figure and explains its significance: "Let mans soule be a Spheare . . ." Unlike Cleon, the speaker accepts the full implications of the Crucifixion, even though it occurred in the east and he is riding westward. The vision of pain and glory, though too much to behold, reconciles the speaker to his own death which has been saved from eternal night by Christ's death. He recalls the image of heavenly spheres as it is reflected in his vision of Christ:

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<sup>21</sup>Kathleen Tillotson, "Donne's Poetry in the Nineteenth Century," Mid-Victorian Studies (London, 1965), 278-300, and Joseph E. Duncan, "The Intellectual Kinship of John Donne and Robert Browning," SP, 50 (1953), 81-100.

Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,  
 And tune all spheres at once, pierced with those holes?<sup>22</sup>

The single sphere, the soul of one man, is reconciled, "tuned" to its creator, in Christ's redemptive act.

In contrast, Cleon's range as an artist extends to philosophy in which he asserts his expertise on matters of the soul. He has obliterated all previous knowledge about the soul:

And I have written three books on the soul  
 Proving absurd all written hitherto  
 And putting us to ignorance again. (11.57-59)

Cleon turns the sphere, wishes for a transcendent soul, but refuses to accept "Paulus," whose teaching points to the event beyond the poem, the Good Friday which Donne's poem celebrates.

Soul is a crucial concept for Browning, and it radiates aesthetic, religious, and amorous connotations in his oeuvre. It appears fairly early in "Cleon" and helps the figure of the sphere to function as a transition from earthly to spiritual considerations. With its traditional associations, the sphere works as an emblem of soul and the ability to know about what is unseen. As in Donne's poem, Cleon's language as he points to the sphere is metaphysical both in its particularity and in its tone of scientific analysis. Thus, Cleon gives the text to the figure:

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<sup>22</sup>The Divine Poems, ed., Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1952), 11.21-22.

It takes but little water just to touch  
 At some one point the inside of a sphere,  
 And, as we turn the sphere, touch all the rest  
 In due succession: but the finer air  
 Which not so palpably nor obviously,  
 Though no less universally, can touch  
 The whole circumference of that emptied sphere,  
 Fills it more fully than the water did;  
 Holds thrice the weight of water in itself  
 Resolved into a subtler element.  
 And yet the vulgar call the sphere first full  
 Up to the visible height--and after, void;  
 Not knowing air's more hidden properties.  
 And thus our soul, misknown, cries out to Zeus  
 (11. 99-112)

The ability to see "the finer air," the soul, where the "vulgar" see nothing is the mark of the artist. Soul must infuse art; without it, even perfect art is empty. Thus, Andrea del Sarto, the faultless painter, who nonetheless could not paint "soul" fails to achieve the greatness of Raphael and Michelangelo. Fra Lippo Lippi's quarrel with his superiors centers on how to paint soul. Lippi's ability, in contrast to Cleon's over-refined sensibility, is to see soul where his superiors only see vulgarity. Browning makes a similar point from opposite directions; Lippi sees soul mired in corporality, Cleon sees it in air.

The repetition of the word "vulgar" in the foregoing passage of the poem, serves two functions. First, it defines Cleon's disdain of the people, his snobbery, and his alliance with Protus. It also serves in the same dual way that the word "sane" does at the end of the poem. It distances the speaker from his creator. In this sense, "Cleon" is a presumptuous poem. In defining the spaces between the character and the creator, what Browning claims as a distancing device for the

sake of humility and anonymity becomes a mask behind which great assertions can be made. The poet's consciousness creates the ironic distance between Cleon's imperfect understanding of soul and improper perception of the difference between belief and sanity. The incarnation hovering behind the irony at the end of the poem is indeed double. The claims made for the poet in his sphere are hardly less than for the deity in his.

The flower appears at a crucial moment in the poem, after Cleon runs through the litany of his formidable ancestry, Homer, Terpander, and Phidias, and has named his unique contribution; "running these into one soul." He turns to botany to explain his own method of creation. As in an impresa, this varicolored flower is another hieroglyph of various aspects of the same concept. (as in, for example, Herbert's "Prayer") It represents the artist taking earlier forms and improving upon them, with the additional suggestion of the organic, sexual aspect of creation:

The wild flower was the larger; I have dashed  
Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's  
Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,  
And show a better flower if not so large:  
I stand myself.

The strong masculine verbs, "dashed," "pricked," and "driven," expose the act of creation as violent--first destroying then remaking. Browning must remake in order to make, and his cultivated poetry he hopes is a "better flower, if not so large." His assertion, "I stand myself," is brave if not defiant. Where he stands himself he

acknowledges as a lesser position. Even though his hybrid flower encompasses all the arts, represents a bringing in of a large aesthetic body into one soul, it is not going to yield a larger fruit, but will produce a smaller flower. Cleon/Browning heroically asserts that his aesthetic position, while diminished, is yet more "varicolored," an apt adjective for his own poetry.

Many readers of "Cleon" have found Browning's stance in regard to his persona more distanced and ironic than the foregoing reading will allow. While it is true that the language of the poem is measured, philosophical and contemplative and lacks the exuberance of many other Browning monologues, the subject of immortality and the questions of the meaning of temporal existence are central to Browning's own concerns. While the religious content has been generally recognized, it has not been sufficiently considered as also a poem about art. Cleon deserves to be placed with the cast of Browning's artists. The poem is particularly valuable, then, precisely because it combines Browning's religious and artistic concerns.

In addition, the solitude of the meditation makes the poem unusual: Protus is addressed, but at a distance. Cleon writes a letter to him rather than talks to him. The atmosphere emphasizes the loneliness of a being as it contemplates its own extinction. The emblematic portrait of the pan-artist Cleon, as he seeks solace for his temporality, is enriched by Browning's emblematic technique without being warmed by it. The floor, the sphere, and the flower

exist in a realm of geometric shapes. Even the hybrid flower is an abstraction in the poem: we have no concept of what it looks like. So the picture on the mosaic floor remains a mystery: we do not know what it looks like. And the sphere appears empty. The three figures of the impresa exist in a realm of time for which the promise of Christian joy beyond the grave offers little solace. Browning, like Cleon, burdened with temporality, searches for escape out of time but finds instead emblems of his dilemma.

## CHAPTER 4

## Soul Food: Fact, Fancy, and Fable

To the Reader.  
 If you are satisfied with my Emblemes,  
 I here set before you a second service.  
 It is an Aegyptian dish, drest on  
 the English fashion. They, at  
 their Feasts, used to present a  
 Death's head at their second course:  
 This will serve for both. You need  
 not fear a surfit: Here is but little;  
 and that, light of digestion: If it but  
 please your Palate, I question not  
 your stomach: Fall too; and much good  
 it may do you.

Quarles, Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man

According to legend, Robert Browning enjoyed eating a jar of mayonnaise plain.<sup>1</sup> Although perhaps more fable than fact, the tale indicates not only the slightly skewed tastes and appetites of the poet (mayonnaise is a common sauce but not a common course) but it can also serve as impresa of an emblem about an aspect of Browning's own creative process. The anecdote captures some of the grotesque yet familiar quality of Browning's images--a Victorian characteristic as well. Lear or Carroll might have composed verses on the mayonnaise or, indeed, on the jar. Furthermore, eating and food assume

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<sup>1</sup>William Clyde DeVane would open his seminar on Browning with this anecdote which I have otherwise been unable to trace.

for Browning metaphorical and metaphysical significance akin to those which Quarles expressed in the conceit which stands as epigraph to this chapter. Quarles conceives of his emblems as spiritual food which nourish the reader's soul insofar as the poet has pleased the reader's palate and thereby has allowed the lesson to go down with the taste. This didactic aspect of emblems, messages served in a digestible form, allies them with the fable, apologue and parable with which they share varied and close affinities.<sup>2</sup> For the poet, the role of fabulist is quite close to the role of hierophant, the prophet and would-be savior of his people. Browning assumes the role of fabulist when he wears the relatively diaphanous veil of the fictional Persian dervish, Ferishtah, in Ferishtah's Fancies (1884). This relatively ignored volume is particularly enlightening in regard to Browning's complex notions of the role of the poet, the concept of fable in relation to poetry, and the connection of these two ideas to his concept of "fancy." Moreover, it is not accidental that this volume of verse fables is organized around the emblematic use of foods. Browning acknowledges the traditions which bear upon his poetry and his poetic in this allusive way.

The entire process of ingestion and digestion had a particular meaning for Browning. In addition to the idea of serving to the reader

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<sup>2</sup>John L. Lievsay, "Emblem," The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry (Princeton, 1965), p. 217.

the poem as moral repast, he thought of the poetry-making process in terms of eating. Before he can be certified as a chef, the poet must engage in a related though somewhat more basic feast himself. His food is perhaps uncooked, but is essential before he can make his fancy. A fancy turns into a poem by means of a long process which begins by the poet as a seeker after knowledge "eating" the raw facts of this world. From the point of view of the making of the poet, then, taking in earthly matter and digesting it cannot be separated from the spirituality of the creative process. Eating, as a basic crude fact of life and as one of the urgent necessities for the perpetuation of life suggests the earthliness of Browning's work, his insistence upon ordinary yet essential activities as a starting place for his most exalted flights.

Thus, both for the writer and the reader participate in Browning's poetic as guests at a banquet. (It seems particularly appropriate in this regard that Browning spent his later years as an inveterate diner-out, a case in part of translating a rich figure into a somewhat pallid reality.) The figurative feast which nurtures both parties join in Browning's concept of "fancy," the term which he favored over the more contemporary "imagination." This chapter, which in its dimensions may resemble a rather over-crowded Victorian repast, will delineate the conceit of eating, first as it refers to the making of fancies within the poet's consciousness as exemplified in Sordello. Next, the chapter will trace some emblems of food

as they are used to convey fancies as fables to the reader in Ferishtah's Fancies. Finally, the idea of "fancy" as fable in the way the concept appears in Asolando: Facts and Fancies (1889) will be seen as the summation of Browning's emblematic poetic as it derives from his influence by Quarles's use of "fancy" as in his title, Divine Fancies.

In order to understand the ways in which Browning's own concept of fancy works within his oeuvre, one must remember something of the tradition of the term. In Browning's vocabulary, "fancy" not only replaces the Romantic idea usually expressed by the word "imagination" but it adds to that idea the deeply moral and specifically didactic intention of earlier poetries. A fancy, in addition to being fanciful, also signifies a deeply moral truth. In contrast, traditional Romantic terminology, following Coleridge, generally conceives of the "imagination" as the highest order of creativity. Imagination is the unique power of making something new. Fancy, on the other hand, usually represents a lower sort of creative activity, as in Coleridge for example, where it has no power to reform or to unify its materials. Browning (and sometimes, Keats) conserves an earlier usage--generally before Dryden--where the two terms were used more or less synonymously. Browning, however, rarely uses the term, "imagination" in a technical sense. In addition to retaining a usage which reached back to medieval times, Browning, who knew Italian, may be importing some of the connotations of fantasia

as it is used in Italian. Furthermore, fantasia is the higher creative faculty and would be translated "imagination" whereas immaginazione is the lower faculty and would be translated "fancy."<sup>3</sup> In the course of his career, the concept also reestablishes its connection with its origins in the word "fantasy." Fantasy or dream and fancy unite in thematic patterns in many poems. These patterns become particularly noticeable in Asolando where the sub-title, Facts and Fancies suggests that an implicit theme running through the volume is the relationship between these two crucial concepts for Browning.

"Flute-Music, with an Accompaniment" deals with a conscious relationship between dreaming, fantasy, and its connection to fact, on the one hand, and one's deepest fancies, on the other. Moreover, a fantasy is also "fabulous" in the sense of telling a fable since it too "dresses up" a message of deep, inner truth.

Browning's clearest explanation of the meaning and the importance of the idea of fancy comes in Book I of The Ring and the Book where he struggles to reconcile "fact" and "fancy" to the truth he is about to present. A unifying theme in that manifold work is the relationship between one's perception of reality, a deeper truth, and the role of the poet in reaching that truth. After presenting the ring and the book as emblems, the narrator thinks about the function of

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<sup>3</sup>A. S. P. Woodhouse, "Fancy" pp. 270-71 and "Imagination," pp. 370-77. Op. cit.

the Book. He finds that he "dug/The lingot truth" from the Book: it contained the raw facts. Bare facts, however, are inadequate for the whole of any truth. The poet can supply the rest with his imagination:

Yes; but from something else surpassing that,  
 Something of mine which, mixed with the mass,  
 Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.  
 Fancy with fact is just one fact the more.  
 To wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced  
 Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,  
 As right through ring and ring runs the djereed  
 And binds the loose, one bar without a break.

(Book I, ll. 461-68)

The poet's fancy, like a wooden javelin, holds loose facts together, makes the poem, a unity of variety, art. The "fancy with fact" grows into a larger fact, a moral truth revealing a universal reality beneath all the working of the raw evidence of the world. Browning's emblems are "facts" or objects of the ordinary world mixed with "fancy" or the poet's deep understanding. Together they yield truth. In this passage, an emblem for fancy is the jereed, a Moorish weapon, which is then interpreted in emblematic terms. Browning's figures are frequently obscure; in this case it requires one to visualize the action of the shaft binding together various rings until they appear continuous, "one bar," a perfect whole. The Ring is the whole of separate truths which need to be gradually refined--the truth in all its complexity. In this sense, the twelve books are the text which completes the ring emblem. Like Milton's, Browning's aim is to justify the ways of God to man, and he intends to do so without ignoring the terrible circuitousness of those ways. Art--fancy mixed

with fact--is the way to convey that truth.

Browning himself was aware that he likened the poet's ability to mix fancy with fact to a baffling and indirect sort of aesthetic digestion. Late in his life, in 1882, he explains the process in a letter to Mrs. Bronson:

There is an old peculiarity in my mental digestion--a long and obscure process. There comes up unexpectedly some subject for poetry which has been dormant and apparently dead for perhaps dozens of years. A month since I wrote a poem of some two hundred lines about a story I heard more than forty years ago and never dreamed of trying to repeat, wondering how it had so long escaped me; and so it has been with my best things.<sup>4</sup>

Browning expressed some sense of his association of eating and art at least as early as 1831 when he confesses to Euphrasia Fanny Haworth that he must eat Beauty in order to know it fully:

Do look at a Fuschia in full bloom and notice the clear little honey drop depending from every flower . . . I have but just found it out, to my no small satisfaction, --a bee's breakfast. . . . Taste and be Titania, --you can, that is. All this while, I forget that you will perhaps never guess the good of the discovery: I have, you are to know, such a love for flowers and leaves--some leaves--that I every now and then, --in an impatience at being unable to possess myself of them thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent, --bite them to bits . . .<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Cited in notes to the Centenary Edition, ed. F. G. Kenyon, 10, (London, 1912), p. iv.

<sup>5</sup>Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, ed., Thurman Hood (New Haven, 1933), p. 1.

Whether this event is pose or actuality, in Browning's poetic the eating of the Fuschia can be an emblem for the immediacy and the primacy of his own creative process.

As early as Sordello (1840), the eating of plants signifies the first step in the poetic transformation of fact to fancy. Ingestion of objects in nature triggers the first step toward creative metamorphosis. The young Sordello, like Browning in his parents' home, peoples his imagination. The people enter his mind by means of a mental feast with cannibalistic overtones. Sordello eats books and characters as if they were that Fuschia plant, in order to possess them thoroughly. At first, the process is passive, and, like the impulses of an insect, without consciousness:

And first a simple sense of life engrossed  
Sordello in his drowsy Paradise;  
The day's adventures for the day suffice--  
Its constant tribute of perceptions strange,  
With sleep and stir in healthy interchange,  
Suffice, and leave him for the next at ease  
Like the great palmer-worm that strips the trees,  
Eats the life out of every luscious plant,  
Puts forth two wondrous winglets, alters quite,  
And hies him after unforeseen delight.  
So fed Sordello.           (Book I, 11.626-37)

The metamorphosis of palmer-worm to fly, like caterpillar to butterfly, suggests transcendence, but rather than dwelling upon the spirituality of the image, Browning insists upon its earthly and fundamental elements. Sordello, which is like the Prelude in the sense that it traces the growth of a poet, insists upon basic, individual bodily processes as analogues to the creative act. Nature influences,

although not as a breeze which works as a moral force upon the unself-conscious child, but instead like a strong instinct which urges the youth actively to take in the raw materials for his creative metamorphosis.

Not only does the young poet take in strange perceptions automatically, but he also is unaware of the delights which result from this creative cum digestive process. It is simply his nature. After having fed his imagination with the raw materials of the external world, Sordello can make fancies out of them. In Browning's vocabulary, this process might be described as making fancies out of facts. The next step in creativity is more conscious. Although the poet is still an apprentice, he knows what he is doing. Creativity begins in one's nature, but the poet is made as well as born. After feeding, Sordello creates fancies which take on a life of their own:

As ever, round each new discovery, wreathed  
 Luxuriantly the fancies infantine  
 His admiration, bent on making fine  
 Its novel friend at any risk, would fling  
 In gay profusion forth: a ficklest king,  
 Confessed those minions!--eager to dispense  
 So much from his own stock of thought and sense  
 As might enable each to stand alone  
 And serve him for a fellow; with his own,  
 Joining the qualities that just before  
 Had graced some older favorite. Thus they wore  
 A fluctuating halo, yesterday  
 Set flicker and tomorrow filched away, --  
 Those upland objects, each of separate name,  
 Each with an aspect never twice the same,  
 Waxing and waning as the new-born host  
 Of fancies, . . . (Book I, 11. 638-654)

Browning describes the early products of Sordello's mind, his "infantile fancies," but he does not mean to suggest that all fancies are infantile. The budding poet hopes that soon his young frail fancies will be stronger and will be able to stand alone. The solitary fancies of the lonely poet become themselves fully realized characters and can serve as companions, "fellows" to solace the solitary poet.

Later, as a man, Sordello's early nutrition serves him well when the moment has come for him to act "to some purpose." Although he has failed in his course of action, he is moved to convince Salinguerra of the cause of knowledge which is also the people's cause. For this purpose, he turns to song, to his role as troubadour. He draws upon the results of his mental digestion, and Browning attributes the force of his success to his having been well-nourished:

A healthy spirit like a healthy frame  
 Craves aliment in plenty--all the same  
 Changes, assimilates its aliment.  
 Perceived Sordello, on a truth intent?  
 Next day no formularies more you saw  
 Than figs or olives in a sated maw.  
 'Tis knowledge wither such perceptions tend;  
 They lose themselves in that, means to an end,  
 The many producing some one new,  
 A last unlike the first. (Book V, ll. 437-46)

This ability to alter the food of perception, the function of fancy and the artist's power, is contrasted with the inability of the false god, "the man of brass" to transform what he is fed:

If lies are true,  
 The Caliph's wheel-work man of brass receives  
 A meal, munched millet grains and lettuce leaves  
 Together in his stomach rattle loose;  
 You find them perfect next day to produce  
 But ne'er expect the man on strength of that  
 Can roll an iron camel-collar flat  
 Like Haroun's self! I tell you, what was stored  
 Bit by bit through Sordello's life, outpoured  
 That eve, was, for that age, a novel thing:  
 (11. 446-55)

The well-nurtured poet who has "stored" perceptions, knowledge, strength and beauty as food "bit by bit" gives forth to an audience of judges and demonstrates the power of the true artist:

And round these three the People formed a ring,  
 Of visionary judges whose award  
 He recognized in full. (11. 456-58)

Sordello's triumphal moment is similar to the moments of power exhibited by Roland and Thamuris and, like them, is followed by the death of the artist.

Much later in Browning's career, in the volume Ferishtah's Fancies, the poet, nearer to death himself, is more willing to face the audience in his own voice and may have been more willing to deal with his association of poetic power with death. Whereas he was eager to disclaim identity with his earlier personae, asserting either their entirely historical accuracy or their totally fictional character, in this volume he at least partially acknowledges that his character is not only a fiction but a "disguise," the term implying that someone wears the costume:

Do not suppose there is more than a thin disguise of a few Persian names and allusions. There was no such person as Ferishtah; and the stories are all inventions. The Hebrew quotations are put in for a purpose, as a direct acknowledgement that certain doctrines may be found in the Old Book which the Concoctors of Novel Schemes of Morality put forth as discoveries of their own.<sup>6</sup>

Behind the disguise is Robert Browning in one role that succeeding generations chose to remember--a Victorian sage, giving to his readers spiritual support and moral uplift. He had rehearsed the role throughout his poetic career--a seer blest who can transmit timeless truths.

These truths can be told in the form of fables. The title, Ferishtah's Fancies, indicates, through Browning's substitution of fancy for fable, his identification of emblematic teaching with the kind of lessons taught by fables. He may have known that many emblems (some of Whitney's for example) used fables such as Aesop for texts. The dominant images of food in the volume recall Quarles's food image as part of a tradition of thinking of poetry as a way of making a lesson pleasing--the idea of the candy-coated pill. Browning's Ferishtah's Fancies is akin to the Victorian emblem books which were designed for children with a strictly didactic purpose. The moralizing aroma rises from the dish of ortolans of his Prologue to

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<sup>6</sup>Handbook, p. 477, from Nicoll and Wise, Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century, i, 470-71.

the Reader. The union of eating and the word "fancy" join in the volume with the idea of fable. The original inspiration of the poems was a volume entitled the Fables of Pilpay (Bidpai), but, with the exception of "The Eagle," which is related to a chapter in a fable of Pilpay (Chapter II Fable III),<sup>7</sup> none of the poems in Browning's volume is taken from his childhood reading. As he himself confessed, the dervish is a disguise for his own sage knowledge: the coloring is remotely Persian.

The close affinity between fable and emblem, at least in their moralizing aspect, is partly due to their common characteristic of being part of an allegorical mode. Fables, like emblems are allegorical in character; the verse fable originated in primitive allegory in which plants and animals speak like human beings.<sup>8</sup> In Ferishtah's Fancies, edible plants and animals represent human values. Browning's Oriental source reached him through an English version of a seventeenth-century French translation, Le Livre des Lumières, attributed to a mythical Pilpay. The French translation, itself, can be traced through Italy to an eighth-century Arabic version of second-century Italian apologues.<sup>9</sup>

These fables of Browning have been interpreted as parables

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<sup>7</sup>Handbook, p. 476.

<sup>8</sup>"Fable in Verse," Op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

or homilies, and they have also been interpreted as topical allegories which attack some popular versions of Herbert Spenser's ideas of historical Christianity.<sup>10</sup> While the poems do partake in the fierce debates of the times on the nature and truth of Christianity, they do so in the form of emblemized fables. The original titles of the poems betray their emblematic conception. Before publication, each poem bore a title which labeled the allegorical subject, "Belief," "Incarnation," "Pain," "Gratitude," in the manner of Ripa's Iconologia. Browning altered his titles to the more whimsical (and more concealing) ones of the printed volume when he was three-quarters done.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the poems conform to the three basic elements of Browning's emblematic verse; they employ common objects as hieroglyphs in a larger "picture," the hieroglyph is then interpreted and moralized, and, finally, the one who reads these emblems claims special ability to read and convey the message.

Although this volume has rarely been accorded a high place in Browning's achievement, Chesterton, whose interpretations and appreciations remain interesting, thought Browning's quality undiminished. Chesterton noticed the emblematic qualities in this particular work without labeling them as such. Since Browning tended to give increasing attention to the abstract qualities as he aged, the emblematic

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<sup>10</sup>C. R. Tracy, "Caliban Upon Setebos," Studies in Philology, 35 (July, 1938), pp. 491-92.

<sup>11</sup>Handbook, p. 475.

quality is perhaps more noticeable in this volume. Nonetheless, Chesterton recognized that the emblematic quality, what he terms "grotesque allegory" is Browning's "supreme peculiarity:"

Here perhaps more than anywhere else we see that supreme peculiarity of Browning-- his sense of the symbolism of material trifles. Enormous problems and yet more enormous answers, about pain, prayer, destiny, liberty, and conscience are suggested by cherries, by the sun, by a melon-seller, by an eagle flying in the sky, by a man tilling a plot of ground. It is this grotesque allegory which really characterizes Browning among all other poets.<sup>12</sup>

The "material trifles" are hieroglyphs, the mundane objects which mediate between Browning's transcendent yearnings and his intense commitment to the actual objects of the physical world. This more noticeable quality in the later Browning works contributes to the characteristic Santayana vilified as barbaric.<sup>13</sup> In Browning's defense, however, the ability to depict large existential battles being fought with trivial weapons has been mastered by much modern writing; Pound, Joyce, and Eliot, among others, might have learned from Browning.

Theodore Watts-Dunton tried to capture the essence of this quality in his review of Ferishtah's Fancies for The Athenaeum.

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<sup>12</sup>Browning, (London, 1930), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup>"The Poetry of Barbarism" Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, New York, 1900, pp. 106-216.

Many poets write from a tradition of literary history, giving an aura of "artistic remoteness" to their works, but Browning gives his world directly, from no Parnassian elevation but with unhazed, earthly eyes. Watts-Dunton observes, rather ambiguously, "It is no wonder then, that of all high-class poets he is the most entirely without dignity."<sup>14</sup> Watts-Dunton was not entirely comfortable with Browning's literary unconventionality. One of the objects of his dismay was the tone and the subject of the Prologue in which Browning gives a favorite recipe for ortolans as a way of recommending his poetry to readers. The form of the Prologue recalls Quarles as he addresses his reader with a gustatory conceit. Furthermore, the rhetoric of Browning's poem indicates that the recipe for ortolans is an emblem. The Italian recipe, like the poetry, may not be haute cuisine, or "high-class," as Browning himself heartily admits, but it may delight and instruct, perhaps specifically because rather than in spite of its provincial character. Browning begins by directly addressing his reader:

Pray, Reader, have you eaten ortolans  
 Ever in Italy?  
 Recall how cooks there cook them: for my plan's  
 To-Lyre with Spit ally. (ll. 1-4)

The Poet, wearing an apron, turns the Spit with one hand and plucks the Lyre with the other. The tone is Byronic, but the conceit is

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<sup>14</sup>An unsigned review in The Athenaeum (6 December, 1884), pp. 725-27, from Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, Browning: The Critical Heritage (London, 1970), p. 488.

emblematic. The technique of cooking these birds is conveyed in language deliberately "without dignity:"

They pluck the birds, --some dozen luscious lumps,  
Or more or fewer, --  
Then roast them, heads by heads and rumps by rumps,  
Stuck on a skewer. (11.5-8)

There are three simple ingredients in the dish:

First comes plain bread, crisp, brown, a toasted square:  
Then, a strong sage-leaf:  
(So we find books with flower dried here and there  
Lest leaf engage leaf.)  
First, food--then, piquancy--and last of all  
Follows the thirdling:  
Through wholesome hard, sharp soft, your tooth must bite  
Ere reach the birdling. (11.13-20)

As he gives the recipe as hieroglyph, he prepares for its interpretation as literature: leaves which feed the palmer-worm and the leaves of the Fuchsia plant have become, in the lines 15-16 of the parenthesis, the leaves in a book. The "admixture" of the three ingredients which are separately uninteresting and, in the case of the "crust," at least, "unpalatable," creates a gustatory miracle. Together they transcend the ordinary by "permeating" each other to yield extraordinary delight. Thus, Browning interprets his figure:

So with you meal, my poem: masticate  
Sense, sight, and song there!  
Digest these, and I praise your peptics' state,  
Nothing found wrong there. (11.29-32)

As a representation of the blending of the arts which define an aspect of Browning's poetic, he cites the three elements of his poetry as "sense, sight, and song." As in "Cleon," he claims to be artist of

all the arts. Of the origins of his digestive analogy, however, he professes amazement: "Whence springs my illustration who can tell?" (1.33) He had evidently forgotten his letter to Mrs. Bronson only one year earlier, but telling of that sort was repellent to him at any rate. He teaches in the Prologue that one takes images as one finds them. No matter the unlikely places or the unlikely combinations, if they are true to what happens in reality, they are needed to form the highest truth. As reader of his emblem, Browning gives the precept:

A fancy-freak by contrast born of thee,  
 Delightful Gressoney!  
 Who laughest "Take what is, trust what may be!"  
 That's Life's true lesson, --eh? (11.37-40)

Here, Browning himself explicitly connects the idea of eating and learning about the morality of life with his notion of "fancy." For it would be logical to connect eating an unusual dish--in this case, the ortolans--with begetting an unusual poem, a "fancy-freak" and, further, that the poem, not in spite of its common origins, but because of them, would be able to transmit "Life's true lesson."

The first poem in the volume, "The Eagle" describes the apprenticeship of the dervish. Browning, once more, insists that the true seer cannot turn his back upon the world. Ferishtah refuses to eat in order to test the beneficence of Providence. Fasting leads to swooning and thence to dreaming in which the would-be prophet hears a voice admonishing him for wasting his natural power

to function in the world: "Sluggard, arise: work, eat, then feed who lacks!" Ferishtah decides that he will go to feed starving souls "and since men congregate / In towns, not woods, --to Ispahan forthwith!" Browning's indirect challenge to the Romantic poetic of the Lake Country and of spirituality without corporality is couched in Ferishtah's advance upon the towns. With many vogues in his monologues, with The Inn Album and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country as well as with The Ring and the Book, he argued his case. Fancy can arise out of the sordid crimes of urban humanity as well as out of skylarks. Furthermore, by feeding souls, he intends to save them.

"A Bean-Stripe: After Apple-Eating" is perhaps the most grotesque (in Chesterton's sense) and the most complex of the emblematic fables in this volume. The poem precedes rather fitfully and always densely, but it seeks to answer a question of enormous breadth. Unlike the diction of the Prologue, the language is exalted. A reluctant initiate asks Ferishtah the "peevish" question: "Sir be frank! / A good thing or a bad thing--Life is which?" (11.3-4) Overtones of the desperate importunities of bewildered Victorians as they sought solace from doubt from the Master echo in the question which also plagued Browning. As he grew older, he increasingly began to think of the celestial and the diabolical as two polarities of almost Zoroastrian exclusivity; as the next chapter will show, he cast his important Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day in terms of black-white polarities.

Browning opens his poem with the rhetoric of an emblem as he commands attention: "Look, I strew beans." The seeker of absolute knowledge needs to decide whether speckled beans are black or white. As a first step in comprehending such complexity, Browning interprets one aspect of the impresa:

Well, for beans  
Substitute days, --show, ranged in order, Life--  
Then, tell me its true color! Time is short,  
Life's days compose a span, --as brief be speech!  
(11.13-16)

The condensation of Life to a handful of speckled beans is partly due to the brevity of man's days. Life piled on life would be too short to seek this answer. An emblematic mode, with its visual aids, serves to focus and intensify, thereby to condense the answer.

In his haste to reach a conclusion, the pessimistic scholar argues feverishly that the beans are mainly black, that Life is evil or its absence with no positive good to it. Ferishtah patiently returns to the impresa, but this time he interprets the specks on the beans, "man's sum of moments:" and, furthermore, man's consciousness of such moments:

"Look, I strew beans"--resumed Ferishtah--"beans  
Blackish and whitish; what they figure forth  
Shall be man's sum of moments, bad and good,  
That make up Life, --each moment when he feels  
Pleasure or pain, his poorest fact of sense  
Consciousness anyhow: there's stand the first;  
Whence next advance shall be from points to line,  
Singulars to a series, parts to whole,  
And moments to the Life. How look they now,  
Viewed in the large, those little joys and griefs  
Ranged duly all a-row at last, like beans  
--These which I strew? (11.41-52)

After having described the beans and explained "what they figure forth," Browning interprets the text; thus far he has followed the traditional form of an emblem. The beans cast their reflections upon each other. Good would not have as much value without evil. Joy gains in depth and meaning from sorrow:

Choose a joy!  
 Bettered it was by sorrow gone before,  
 And sobered somewhat by the shadowy sense  
 Of sorrow which came after or might come.  
 (11.66-69)

Browning's argument to explain suffering is characteristic of him and has led him to be accused of mindless optimism.<sup>15</sup> He presents not so much optimism as hope--and that from rather existential a despair. He knows that his perceptions are solipsistic and that all he can assert, finally, is that these perceptions are his. As a poet, he lends them out. To illustrate the complexity of his position, he moves to another impresa, a flying orb. From an object one plants in the earth, Browning travels to the celestial sphere. The image of the orb recalls earlier images of "rays," light, and radiance; what he calls "spectral whiteness" in Sordello. Reminiscent of Shelleyan imagery, its dizzying circlings refine and transcend the

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<sup>15</sup>See Henry Jones, Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher (New York, 1891) for an argument from a philosophical point of view that Browning is not a simple optimist and LeRoy E. Lawson, Very Sure of God: Religious Language in the Poetry of Robert Browning (Nashville, 1974) for an argument from a religious point of view that Browning's faith is built upon despair.

earthly images of the beans. Like Shelley's image of the star,<sup>16</sup> Browning's orb represents poetic consciousness. In the following passage, he expresses his concept of the specialized perception of the artist as visionary in terms which could serve as a catalogue of his light imagery:

I am in motion, and all things beside  
 That circle round my passage through their midst, --  
 Motionless, these are, as regarding me:  
 --Which means, myself I solely recognize.  
 They too may recognize themselves, not me,  
 For aught I know or care: but plain they serve  
 This, if no other purpose--stuff to try  
 And test my power upon of raying light  
 And lending hue to all things as I go  
 Moonlike through vapour. Mark the flying orb!  
 Think'st thou the halo, painted still afresh  
 At each new cloud-fleece pierced and passaged through,  
 This was and is and will be evermore  
 Coloured in permanence? The glory swims  
 Girdling the glory-giver, swallowed straight  
 By night's abysmal gloom, unglorified  
 Behind as erst before the advancer: gloom?  
 Faced by the onward-faring, see, succeeds  
 From the abandoned heaven a next surprise,  
 And where's the gloom now? --silver-smitten straight  
 One glow and variegation! So with me,  
 Who move and make, --myself, --the black, the white,  
 The good, the bad, of life's environment.  
 (11. 79-101)

The solipsistic nature of perception, indeed of all consciousness, is emphasized in one way by the poet as emblematiser who points to the

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<sup>16</sup>"Adonais:" The splendours of the firmament of time  
 May be eclipsed, but are extinguished not;  
 Like stars to their appointed height they climb,

Also "The Triumph of Life," where the stars are "heaven's living eyes," 11. 391 ff.

hieroglyph which represents himself: "Mark the flying orb!" The glittering light and the rays of the passages about art from Pauline and Paracelsus, the "ray" which illumines the face of the poet, Thamuris, again, in this poem represent the power of the artist not only to illuminate but also to justify the difficulties of life as well as its glories. Like the varicolored flower of "Cleon," the "one glow and variegation" of the flying orb represents the unity out of variety that is the aim of Browning's poetry. As in "Fra Lippo Lippi," art is "lending hue" to the people. The hues are the perceptions of the artist who enriches life by making people hear and see what is already there:

We're made so that we love  
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
 And so they are better, painted--better to us  
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;  
 God uses us to help each other so  
 Lending our minds out.

("Fra Lippo Lippi," 11.300-306)

In this later poem, Browning recognizes that the best efforts of the artist, however intense, lead to partial understanding at best. He knows that the individual rays fail to capture the truth. Emblems enable him to radiate upon various levels and to concentrate, because he has little choice, upon external reality. He hopes he can "figure forth" a deeper reality:

These round the blank unconsciousness between  
 Brightness and brightness, either pushed to blaze  
 Just through that blank's interposition. Hence  
 the use of things external: man--that's I--  
 Practice thereon my power of casting light,  
 And calling substance, --when the light I cast  
 Breaks into colour, --by its proper name  
 --A truth and yet a falsity. (11.116-23)

Like a magic spell, naming things casts a light, but Browning knows that the light is only partial. Language cannot emblazon any whole truth. For Browning, as for Shelley, "the deep truth is imageless."<sup>17</sup> Any image, like the bean, is speckled and, like a halo, leaves part in darkness.

Alternating exalted images with representations of the meanest specks of life, Browning dives from the firmament of shooting stars, the vastness of space, to the palm-aphis, "minute miracle," for his next hieroglyph or "illustration." Implicitly drawing upon Renaissance concepts of correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, he once again argues that consciousness rarely extends beyond the limits of the self. As long as the leaf of the palm-aphis remains delicious and safe, life for it is good. No matter if a "lance-thrust, Nay/Lightning strikes sere a moss-patch close beside/ Where certain other aphids live and love." (11.174-76)

So with me my Son  
 I know my appointed patch i' the world  
 What pleasures me or pains there: all outside--

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<sup>17</sup>Prometheus Unbound, Act II, Scene IV.

How he, she, it, and even thou, Son, live,  
 Are pleased or pained, is past conjecture, once  
 I pry beneath the semblance, --all that's fit,  
 To practice with, --reach where fact may lie  
 Fathom deep lower. There's the first and last  
 Of my philosophy. (11.164-72)

For a poet who claimed that his poetry spoke in voices not his own, this is a rare confession. It appears that all he can represent is a "semblance" of another consciousness. At least here, even a "fact" cannot be known except subjectively. As if imprisonment in subjectivity were not sufficiently difficult, a further complication which prevents knowledge is the limitations of the tools of the artists. While he uses elaborate figures, he betrays despair at their inadequacy. He apologizes for the failure of art to penetrate far enough beyond surface reality. Browning's argument becomes strange in its efforts to struggle out of despair--at his inability to reach truth, the "thing itself" without having to trust his own conceits. At this point, the poem seems to be leading to utter blankness, a nihilism not usually associated with Browning:

Dost thou blame  
 A soul that strives but to see plain, speak true,  
 Truth at all hazards? Oh this false for real,  
 This emptiness which feigns solidity, --  
 Ever some grey that's white, and dun that's black, --  
 When shall we rest upon the thing itself  
 Not on its semblance? --Soul too weak, forsooth,  
 To cope with fact--wants fiction everywhere!  
 Mine tires of falsehood: truth at any cost!  
 (11.281-89)

"Fact" opposes "fiction" as poems lie about reality. Perceptions lie, the world also is a fiction. At the point where the poem itself appears

to founder on the impossibility of knowing, Browning turns to emblems as concrete images to "reconcile discordancy--unite / Notion and notion." With a sigh of rediscovery he exclaims:

"Ah, the beans, --or, --example better yet, --  
 A carpet-web I saw once leave the loom  
 And lie at gorgeous length in Ispahan!  
 (11. 334-36)

Moving from the beans, he draws attention to another figure in the impresa. From the Persian carpet, he extracts a lesson. Like a dervish, a teacher of truth, the weaver of the varicolored carpet is another representation of the maker, the poet in one of his guises as mediator between God and man. He knows the truth of color. If one attends to the separate colors of the rug, they displease the eye by being too garish or too dull. The craftsman, by blending them produces "a colour born of both / A medium profitable to the sight." Browning rests his confidence upon the artist who, as one of the elect, is chosen to convey understanding which transcends thought, a truth beyond pure intellect:

I needs must blend the quality of man  
 With quality of God, and so assist  
 Mere human sight to understand my Life,  
 What is, what should be, --understand thereby  
 Wherefore I hate the first and love the last, --  
 Understand why things so present themselves  
 To me, placed here to prove I understand.  
 Thus from beginning runs the chain to end,  
 And binds me plain enough. By consequence,  
 I bade thee tolerate, --not kick and cuff  
 The man who held that natures did in fact  
 Blend so, since so thyself must have them blend  
 In fancy, if it take a flight so far.  
 (11. 352-64)

The chain which binds the poet "plain enough" recalls the jereed which binds the loose rings in the earlier passage from The Ring and the Book. Both images occur in relation to "fancy." Browning uses "fancy" here to indicate the sharp distinction he makes between "fiction" and "fancy." If one allows the fancy to loosen, to unbind itself from semblance, the boundaries between good and evil blend; Browning claims that blending justifies good rather than evil, but he can only assert his knowledge of this conviction as part of his special vision: "A power, confessed past knowledge, nay, past thought, /-- Thus thought thus known!"

Another way of defining Browning's emblematic method is that it embodies power "past knowledge" and "past thought." The emblems can be taken in whole, thereby conveying the lesson. Such a magical process can occur in ordinary, common-place ways. It is a process like eating. So Browning concludes his lesson with the apple.

The after-thought of his title, "Also Apple-Eating" makes clear that it is not only the apple, that traditional object of man's forbidden desires, but the eating of it that is significant. The final action of this poem is the dervish raising the apple to his mouth, happily ingesting it, and thanking its Maker for giving him a smooth, maggot-free fruit as his due. The act becomes an impresa as it becomes the starting point of a text. Furthermore, the fable reaches beyond the limits of the poem to bring in associations not only with the edenic apple, but also with other poems about it. By eating his

apple, Browning recasts Milton into his own Oriental/Victorian version who not only tries to accommodate his vision to what appears to be evil in the world, but who also defies the legend by eating the apple and by asserting that, although he has done so, he remains more innocent of evil than corrupted by it, and more faithful than had he not done so. Furthermore, his task as poet is to transform what he has eaten into poetry. Luckily, his apple was maggot-free, ripe, and fresh. Thus, the poetry produced by eating such an apple reflected that wholesome aspect of life. Like the emblem, the diction is deliberately basic:

I eat my apple, relish what is ripe--  
 The sunny side, admire its rarity  
 Since half the tribe is wrinkled, and the rest  
 Hide commonly only a maggot in the core, --  
 And down Zerdusht goes with due smack of lips:  
 But--thank an apple? He who made my mouth  
 To masticate, my palate to approve,  
 My maw to further the concoction- - -  
 (ll. 468-75)

In returning from the bewildering vastness of space, Browning reassures himself with the fundamental act of eating. He praises "Him" who provided a tasty, healthy life as his measure.

If his optimistic poetic message is hard to swallow and appears to be derived too easily, Browning himself refuses to apologize. The lyric which ends "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating" offers his poetry as a result of the delicious quality of his own particular emblematic apple. Out of it grew the text of his poetry. Like the edenic apple, it tells of good and evil; like the first apple, it had

to be eaten. In the lyric, Browning asks neither for praise nor for love for his verse. It reflects what he had to write; he is confident that he fulfilled his obligations. The lyric stands as his motto, as it might stand for one aspect of a Victorian aesthetic creed:

I looked beyond the world for truth and beauty:  
Sought, found and did my duty.

The truth of emblematic fancies can lead from the world to beyond it.

In view of the importance of "fancy" to Browning's conception of "truth and beauty," it is not surprising that he should use the word as sub-title to his final work, Asolando. Facts and Fancies, as the volume is labeled, ends the poet's career on a note that is lighter and less bombastic than the preceding volumes and is quite delightful. Browning revisits many themes and clothes them in familiar styles. Thus, "A Bean Feast" recalls the poet's use of that humble food in Ferishtah's Fancies. Using the form of a fable--a Pope shares a simple meal of beans with peasants--the poet makes the eating of food lead to a lesson about true greatness and true simplicity. "Fancy" is apparently opposed to "fact," as in "Flute Music, With an Accompaniment," a poem which returns to a dialectic between a man and a woman, a form which he perfected in his earliest lyrical poems. Once again, however, as the argument develops, fancy intermingles with fact, as in two themes in the development of a musical movement, to reveal that "fancy with fact is one fact the more." Finally, the poem "Development" illustrates that Browning

believed that the truth of literature comes from reading allegorically; the Iliad is a fable.

In the Prologue to Asolando, Browning dedicates his final volume to the facts, unadorned with "alien glow." He is going to present "The naked very thing" and, like Yeats, finds that in age there is much virtue to walking naked. The "vari-coloured lenses" have been abandoned. Now truth can blaze forth, and each object can "reveal its shape/Clear outlined, past escape." Browning asserts that age has no time for fancy which must be separated from fact:

Hill, vale, tree, flower--they stand distinct,  
Nature to know and name. What then?  
A Voice spoke thence which straight unlinked  
Fancy from fact: see, all's in ken:  
Has once my eyelid winked?

In the last stanza of the Prologue, Browning answers the question, which is a version of Wordsworth's pronouncements on the eye and the object. The answer once again reconciles fact and fancy as it lives in the deepest senses:

No, for the purged ear apprehends  
Earth's import, not the eye late dazed:  
The Voice said "Call my works thy friends!  
At Nature doest thou shrink amazed?  
God is it who transcends."

Browning apparently resigns himself to the earth which he cannot transcend, even though his poems yearn for the white radiance. His consolation remains with his fancy which enables him to sense the inner truth of Nature.

The man in "Flute-Music, With an Accompaniment" possesses this deep inner sense as he hears an inept flautist and listens instead to the music as it might sound.<sup>18</sup> He hears a "variation/Of the old old yearning," a truth about love that the flute ideally can transmit. He responds to that power of emotion as he wonders what deep passion has produced such pipings. He knows that the sounds mean love, but he also hears more precise articulation and modulations of that emotion. His fancy operates upon the pure sounds as he follows the development of the theme:

In my brain Assurance--  
Trust--entire Contentment--  
Passion proved by much endurance;  
Then came--not resentment,  
No, but simply Sorrow:                   (11.29-33)

As if they are dancing a stately measure, the personified emotions present themselves. They rise out of the fact of the flute-music solo and the accompanying fancies of the musing man. The woman tries to break his fancied harmony by revealing the fact of the player's ineptness. The rhymes of "Toulou's" with "Zulu's," "treatise" with "Quid petis?" mock and accompany the woman's deflation of the man's "fancy-spinning."

The man, however, is allowed to have the last word as he reminds his "sweet" that perhaps no artist can perform for the jaded

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<sup>18</sup>George Ridenour, "Browning's Music Poems: Fancy and Fact," PMLA, 78, (1963), 369-77 gives a reading of this poem which has influenced my thinking.



ment, the Iliad is mere fiction and, worse, that Homer never existed. Initially, the reaction to German critical method when applied to the foundations of the culture, both Hebraic and Hellenic, is despair. Browning sighs, "--Though Wolf--ah, Wolf! / Why must he needs come doubting, spoil a dream?" He refuses to have his dream spoiled and saves it by asserting its primacy as truth. As in "Flute-Music," this attempt at stripping the fiction leads to more tenacious adherence to the truth, the essence of fact:

No warrant for the fiction I, as fact,  
 Had treasured in my heart and soul so long--  
 Ay, mark you! and as fact held still, still hold,  
 Spite of new knowledge, in my heart of hearts  
 And soul of souls, fact's essence freed and fixed  
 From accidental fancy's guardian sheath.  
 (ll. 72-77)

The true fancy exists independently of "accidental fancy" which is a mere sheath protecting the heart of truth. The poem returns to the question of dreaming, and Browning distinguishes between idle and true dreams. Like the man whose dream of the message of the flute music remains undestroyed by the woman's facts, so the dream of the Iliad retains its truth. There are indeed dreams from which one does not awake. "But then 'No dream's worth waking'--Browning says."

Browning explains that dreaming is a way, a slow, winnowing way, to "get truth and falsehood known and named as such." Furthermore, the kind of dreaming he means has to do with getting in touch with a poet's fancies. To believe in the truth of the Iliad is a way of

knowing ethical truths. But it is an indirect way. He asks if one can learn what the Iliad teaches without having to waste time believing a mere fancy. Why not simply read Aristotle's Ethics, the "naked very thing?" Fancy is a way of sensing the allegorical level. Browning describes the allegorical function of the Iliad as he wonders how one teaches youth about ethical truth.

Well, who knows by what method, gained my gains,  
 Been taught, by forthrights not meanderings,  
 My aim should be to loathe, like Peleus' son,  
 A lie as Hell's Gate, love my wedded wife,  
 Like Hector, and so on with all the rest.  
 (11. 98-102)

Thus, one reads the fancy for the fact. In this case, as with the original titles of Ferishtah's Fancies, the facts are abstractions; Honesty and Fidelity. Clothing them in allegory gives them an independent life, makes them available to all ages, and imparts to them a timeless quality. Another way of putting this would be to say that the Iliad is the feast which makes the lesson easy to swallow. One can come to such fancies for the story itself as was young Robert, and be led by degrees to the deeper meanings. Who, no matter what his age, can savor the Ethics plain?

The "Ethics": 't is a treatise I find hard  
 To read aright now that my hair is grey,  
 And I can manage the original.  
 At five years old--how ill had fared its leaves!  
 (11. 109-12)

The tough leaves of the Ethics would have been as hard to digest for the young Browning as for the palmer-worm. Without eating the leaves, there can be no metamorphosis.

Browning appears to defend the use of literature as fable as if there were no other reasons for reading a poem, as if the relationship of fancy to truth were completely logical, as if one could dispense with the special relationship between the dream of the truth of a tale and the reality of that truth. In spite of these assertions, however, he has indicated, particularly in the swirling language of "A Bean-Stripe," that he knows the relationships are not only didactic and rational. Angus Fletcher points out that although an allegory appears to be an affair of the mind and not of the heart, it can be an emotive utterance. The relationship of fancy to fact, as in an allegory, "are not simply logical; they are not merely reasonable; they are to a high degree magical relationships which have only superficially the form of ordered arguments."<sup>19</sup> Browning knew that the relationship of truth to poetry is beyond simple thought. His use of emblems and his portrayal of the poet as a hierophant conveys his sense of the miracle of poetry. Some of his arguments in this vein have led critics to charge him unjustly with being against intellect and thought. "Past knowledge" and "past thought" as a way of knowing does not, however, deny the immense importance of intellect. Browning's emblems blend thought and the beyond. His beans, like those which the impoverished Jack brings home to his Mother, lead to gigantic results.

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<sup>19</sup>Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode (Ithaca, 1964), p. 180.

## CHAPTER 5

Browning's Parleyings: An Emblematic Portrait of the Artist

A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory, and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life--a life like the scriptures, figurative--which such people can no more make out than they can the Hebrew Bible.

Keats, Letters, February 18, 1819

On January 20, 1887, one week before the appearance of his complex autobiographical poem, Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day, Browning warned one of his lady correspondents of its perils with a characteristic digestive image. "I fear toughness in the fibre of the book," he confessed, "and consequent indigestion in the case of the readers--I shall see--and you shall feel!"<sup>1</sup> His fears proved justified; for the most part, Browning's readers have refused to swallow, much less to digest, the enormous Victorian repast he offers. Its scope and circuitous plan has barred it from extensive critical consideration, and although it embraces nearly all of Browning's essential characteristics, no lengthy study has been published for fifty years.<sup>2</sup> A critic has yet to explore the

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<sup>1</sup>William C. DeVane, Kenneth Knickerbocker, New Letters of Robert Browning (New Haven, 1950) Letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup>Two main published studies are: William C. DeVane, Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of a Mind (New Haven, 1927).

coherence of the work, but reading it closely reveals a conscious and elaborate pattern comparable, as far as precision and outline are concerned, to Dante's Commedia and Joyce's Ulysses. In addition to presenting an "appreciation" of the many fine moments in this work of Browning's "decline," this chapter will argue that the Parleyings presents a careful, fully elaborated exposition of Browning's hieroglyphic.

As an autobiography framed in terms of a series of monologues, it carefully and ingeniously acts both as a mirror and as a portrait. None of the portraits directly represents the artist; instead the reader, acting as voyeur or eavesdropper, overhears the artist creating it. Each portrait not only shows a real person other than the artist but also reveals the "tracings"--in Browning's words--of the artist's self as he creates the portrait by criticizing its subject. These tracings form a constellation. Like solar constellations, "suns in little," they are emblematic representations of the artist. Those who can discern Browning by seeing "through the sign to the thing signified" have an intimate portrait of the artist and his time. They thus become initiates, readers in Browning's special sense. Like the hierophants who translate hieroglyphics, they have reached

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1927), hereafter cited as DeVane; and a chapter in Roma A. King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio, 1968). The most recent study of the work is an unpublished dissertation, Celeste Colgan, A Reading of Browning's Parleyings (Maryland, 1973).

the pitch of meaning, a vision of Browning through the emblems of his works.

The seven persons with whom Browning parleys represent different sorts of artists. They are mainly persons from the past, dead long before Browning's time, whom he knew from his early education. They also represent aspects of his poetic art, and the inclusion of other fine arts and public arts as well draws the outlines of Browning's own portrait as an artist. In this sense, each separate parleying can be considered as a hieroglyph which combines with the others to illustrate his poetics. Not until all seven parleyings are read and their lesson taken in can one view the "truth" of the portrait.

The portrait gallery scene in Gilbert and Sullivan's Ruddigore provides a simplified, comic, and parodistic example of the large conception of Browning's composite portraits. (The coincidence of these two works appearing for the first time in the same week, Ruddigore on January 22, 1887 and the Parleyings on January 28, would itself seem to invite the comparison.) In that scene, the stage darkens and the full-length pictures of the Baronets of Ruddigore come to life and remind their living ancestor of their significance to him:

## CHORUS OF FAMILY PORTRAITS

Painted emblems of a race,  
 All accurst in days of yore,  
 Each from his accustomed place,  
 Steps into the world once more.

(The Pictures step from their frames and march  
 round the stage)<sup>3</sup>

Browning, also, conjures up the painted emblems of his past to live for a time and to act as witness or to stand as silent testimony to his own explorations. Unlike the accurst Baronets, they do not speak but are spoken to. Browning's ghosts represent the historical personages of their names only insofar as they have been digested by him. Hence, these emblems convey news of the inner self, Browning's character in a moral sense as well. As in the opera, the final parleying rouses the emblems of the artist to a final march, a ritualized action which ends the debate without trying to resolve it.

Browning's self-portrait reaches beyond verbal arts and, indeed, beyond the traditionally recognized "fine" arts to include applied, practical, and occult arts as well, one reason Apollo serves him well as a household god, and why Paracelsus appeals to him as a human counterpart. If drama seems to be conspicuously absent from Browning's final acknowledgments, the Prologue and Epilogue pay homage to the dramatic form. Furthermore, the title page

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<sup>3</sup>W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, "Ruddigore," The Savoy Operas (London, 1926), p. 45.

imitates a play bill and reminds the reader of the great influence of the drama on his works.

Not only the title page but the title itself of this utterly personal, but characteristically obscure autobiography opens to the reader a way of approaching the work on its various, complex, and carefully interrelated levels. On its literal level, the title gives the reader a clue to the relationship between other people, the past, and the inner life of the artist, relationships that Browning had been concerned about throughout the course of his poetic life. On its allusive level, the Dantean implications of the title suggest a literary model for Browning and the aesthetic concerns that embrace the work as a whole.

The word "parley" suggests that the people have to be dealt with rather than simply to be spoken with. Browning reaches across distances to come to terms with these shades of the past, and the distances are not simply those of time and the times--the "day" of the title--but of temperament as well. The word "certain" indicates a careful process of choice. By selecting these particular people from the past, he indicates boundaries for his own psychological biography. Furthermore, the whole idea of importance itself and its relation to the past is brought into question, raising the theme of fame and fortune as in Chaucer's House of Fame. In this regard, the relative obscurity and unfamiliarity of the seven people further imparts the sense that the past can swallow even people of importance

in their day. Notwithstanding their uncertain historical fortunes, these people generally bear an unquestioned meaning in Browning's own past; most of them were important and had their "day" in Browning's own intellectual development. Browning reaches across the distance of his life as he wrangles with these youthful influences and comes to terms with them over issues of art and of life.

In addition to literal meanings, the title alludes both to Dante as an important literary inspiration for the work, and to Browning's own earlier work, specifically "One Word More," where the phrase "certain people of importance" occurs in the context of the artist's yearnings to master an art other than his own. The title thus signals a return to the aesthetic concerns which that particular poem highlights but which also occupy a major interest in the poet's oeuvre as a whole. On this allusive level, then, the title suggests that the certain people represent the other arts in the portrait of the mind of the poet. In this regard, George Bubb Dodington, a failed politician, portrays the artistry of the con-man, albeit a failed one.

Much like Dante's, whose Commedia is a version of autobiography<sup>4</sup> and whose four-fold meanings had great appeal for

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<sup>4</sup>"'The Comedy of Dante Alighieri' was Dante's own title to the Divine Comedy. . . . But what shall we make of the phrase 'Comedy of Dante Alighiere?'" It might mean either with regard to language or fact; and it probably means both; for Dante surely wrote the Comedy and wrote it about himself. . . . It is in the form of an autobiographical narrative." G. H. Grandgent, Introduction, The Divine Comedy, Modern Library edition (New York, 1932), pp. vii, xi.

Browning, his method in this venture into his past is to pack each reference with historic, symbolic, and personal meaning. The Dantean spirit that hovers over the title informs much of Browning's shapings in the Parleyings, although the form and scope of the later poet's work avoids the epic proportions of the master in favor of a variation of the Victorian confessional mode. Nonetheless, Browning found ways to adapt many of Dante's methods into his own mold. In addition to formal training in music and drawing, Browning's early education included Italian. Cerutti, his Italian tutor, used the works of Dante as a text.<sup>5</sup> Early exposure to Dante's allegorical method made him aware of the rich possibilities of blending history with biography and the uses of an allegorical framework. Moreover, in the general sense that a living man journeys among the familiar dead who not only bear upon his personal past and thus constitute part of the portrait of his own mind but also participate in larger, more public histories and portraits, Browning's work bears the impress of Dante's teaching. Indeed, Browning's work as a whole testifies to the power of the Infernal speeches which could themselves stand as dramatic monologues.

Like Dante in the Commedia, Browning wrote the Parleyings about himself, but, unlike Dante's work, the autobiographical

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<sup>5</sup>N. Hall Griffin and H. C. Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning (London, 1910), p. 90.

narrative is lacking. The outlines have been somewhat obscured, and the great cicerone, Virgil, has been replaced by a continuing, but not explicitly connected imagery of the sun and of cosmic light in general. Not Virgil but Apollo, god of the arts, is the prevailing spirit of the Parleyings. His influence is signalled by the mythos of the Prologue. The covering fable of the work as a whole, one version of which appears in the Prologue, deals with the imagination and its power to create good, perfection, and deepest truth on the one hand and deception and evil on the other. In the beginning of the work, Apollo comes to the Fates to plead for the life of Admetus, but also to plead for the imagination.

As god of all the arts, Apollo opens the Parleyings, reminding the reader that Browning's poetics from beginning to end concern appropriating the whole of art for his poetry. Thus, a main theme of the Parleyings as autobiography of a poet's mind will be envisioned in terms of other arts. From the beginning of Browning's career, he knew that the other arts were part of his imaginative make-up. He partly based his claim to be a poet of importance by taking the other arts into his poetry. For him, to think of poetry is to desire that it would include at least the arts of painting and of music. This, the wish expressed in "One Word More," returning in a new guise as the title to a retrospective work, signals a reworking of many earlier images relating to Browning's aesthetic aim: the bringing together the "crowd" of the other arts into his poetry.

By following the strands of suggestions in the title, the reader also gains a sense of Browning's indirect manner in the work as a whole. This indirection seems on the surface to be its opposite; Browning's direct, occasionally didactic tone hides both the complexity of his plan and the tradition in which the work at least partly belongs. By using the seven persons as reverse dramatic monologues, or as portraits which, instead of talking, are talked to, Browning presents his version of what had become a rich and varied mode: the confession. As it was practiced in England from Wordsworth's Prelude to its Victorian exfoliations, the autobiographical confession had become a tradition that was flexible enough to include the explicit but controlled autobiographical exposures of Mill's Autobiography and Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua, the disguised but more emotional Sartor Resartus of Carlyle, the confessional novel such as Pater's Marius the Epicurean, and even the partially acknowledged confession of Tennyson's In Memoriam.<sup>6</sup> Browning's Parleyings fits into this company in a special sense since it does not deal overtly with a crisis, the expected focus of a confession. It does, however, present in a casuistical, dialectical way a crux, if not a crisis, of style. Browning debates with his adversaries the proper way to present one's vision. This problem, a philosophical and critical one,

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<sup>6</sup>W. David Shaw, "In Memoriam and the Rhetoric of Confession," ELH, 38 (1971), 80-104.

becomes for a poet, the way he defines his poetry and, by extension, himself.

From the beginning, the critical, self-reflexive meaning was missed by his reviewers. Browning was concerned that this important work be understood; for this reason, he had a friend, George Barnett Smith, review the work for the Times. Notwithstanding this precaution, the obscurity of the work had the most well-wishing of his critics bewildered. Smith scoffed at the rumors that this was to be Browning's self-portrait. "The supposition that Mr. Browning's new work was to be of an autobiographical character," he asserted, "is entirely erroneous."<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Smith cannot be blamed for failing to recognize criticism or parleying as autobiographical. In fact, the radical character of this work effectively hides its ties to the autobiographical confession and anticipates Oscar Wilde's understanding that criticism is the only civilized form of autobiography. Browning would agree with Wilde as he explains his point of view:

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilized form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's

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<sup>7</sup>Handbook, p. 493.

physical accidents of deed or circumstance,  
but with the spiritual moods and imaginative  
passions of the mind.<sup>8</sup>

Browning anticipates Wilde by framing a record of his soul as a criticism of seven persons who represent some facet of his soul's development. The actual historical importance of these figures varies--indeed, their relative obscurity aids his project--but their symbolic significance as an aspect of his psychological portrait is unquestionable. Browning's cast of characters indicates that he wanted them to function in more than one sense in his work. If they had been major figures in real life (Handel rather than Avison, for example) or too contemporary (Shelley rather than Smart) they would not have been as easily assimilated into a personal portrait. Browning needed people who could merge into a self-portrait, represent other, more current figures and issues, and yet also be actual people in their own right.

Browning's unusual slowness in forming the Parleyings<sup>9</sup> testifies not only to the importance he placed on this work, but also to the complexity of his plan. Each aspect of the pattern is worked out in a way which not only recalls Dante, but anticipates the almost

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<sup>8</sup>Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks upon the Importance of Doing Nothing," Intentions, The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York, 1969), p. 365.

<sup>9</sup>Handbook, p. 492.

mathematical care of Joyce. His choice of seven people, for example, and his care in regard to the interrelationships of image patterns from one parleying to another indicates the sort of master-plan one associates with Joyce not with Browning.

One task of the Parleyings is to solidify the apparent randomness and nebulousness of an individual consciousness. Browning is akin to Pater (whose Imaginary Portraits was published in the same year as the Parleyings) in his recognition that consciousness is like the flow of a river and that art contains the flow. Browning calls this artistic process "shooting liquidity into a mold" in "With Charles Avison." (l. 209-10) In the case of the Parleyings, the molds are the seven persons with whom he parleys, the solidity of their historical reality is his way of giving the stream of his consciousness significant form and at the same time of demonstrating a humble wisdom that our consciousness often bears the imprint of others, even of discordant others. The complexities of such an examination which tries to encounter the many contradictions that make up an aesthetic sensibility reflects Browning's own mature understanding of the fluctuations of consciousness. As this final imagining of the crowd image, these seven--the number itself emblematic in its implications--taken together present Browning's final great effort to integrate, unify and present his aesthetic theory, a poetic which as its core argues for allegorical treatment of real or realistic subjects and for the use of the other arts in poetry.

The allegorical mode applies to the Parleyings in three ways. First, and most obviously, the seven figures represent both themselves and ideas and men of Browning's own day. Secondly, the work as a whole is conceived in terms of a primary dualism between Good and Evil. Within the limits of this broad dualism, opposing ideas, forces and issues debate. This mental battle or psychomachia is a paradigm for symbolic action which Angus Fletcher traces from Prudentius:

Prudentius in the Psychomachia establishes the battle as an allegorical action, and he describes an actual conflict on a field of battle. But again our term is only a label for a somewhat variable allegorical sequence. Common among the gentler permutations of this imagery of conflict are the "debate" and the "dialogue" . . . where the war is verbal and more ironical and polite than Prudentius' physical struggle. . . . The tradition of the debate is, however, a major one. Prometheus Bound, the work Coleridge took to be the fountainhead of allegory, is written in the debate form.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, a major theme of the Parleyings is the aesthetic question of how to write modern allegory.

DeVane was the first to decode systematically the first and most obvious traditional sort of allegory. He explains the connection between the ostensible person of each parleying and Browning's "connection with certain nineteenth century men and movements."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Angus Fletcher, Allegory (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 156-57.

<sup>11</sup> DeVane, p. xxii.

He explains intellectual issues, incidental allusions, relationships between Browning, his family and friends. DeVane's study thus connects the seven to the Victorian scene and to Browning's life as a public person.

Browning uses these seven characters as aspects of his own mind. The debate between the voice of each parleying and the character becomes part of the psychomachia: Browning against his past as it is truly past and also against his past as it is still alive within him. Furthermore, the measure of his distance from his old friends in 1887 becomes partly a measure of the development of his ideas and thus a chart of his mind. This mental debate presents Browning coping (another connotation of "parleying") with aspects of himself, some which he was less comfortable with than others. His debate with George Bubb Dodington, for example, leaves some indication that Browning was uneasily aware of the evil potential of art, a theme which returns in the Epilogue.

In the third sense, allegory as subject of the debates, Browning asks himself how he can keep the deep levels of allegorical vision with the possibilities of multiple meanings and yet remain modern. Browning regards magical subject matter and elaborate ornamentation as signs of archaic style. He debates these matters of style particularly with Daniel Bartoli and with Gerard de Lairese. Browning still wants to read the Book of Nature, to see into the life of things, but he wishes to keep his feet on the ground. Images of earth and

marching blend and contrast with the images of the cosmos, comets, stars and light as Browning asks if he, too, might be able to "see double." (Lairesse 1.119) Although he seems to be questioning the propriety of using allegory, he actually argues for his own way of allegorizing as opposed to earlier ones. He will give us no miracles, no fantastic beasts floating through air, no supernatural phenomena, but instead he will present us with events and with vistas that we can verify; they actually have happened. Once he draws our attention to them, we can understand them in all their mystery.

The old way of allegorizing has been accommodated to a new, realistic style. There is progress in the arts; or at least the arts march forward.<sup>12</sup> Browning debates this paradoxical situation in With Charles Avison. The perfect march of Charles Avison stands emblematically for a predicament that Browning felt deeply: the paradox of perfection progressing. If there is no progress, he believes that there is no room for him in the aesthetic company. In parleying with Avison, Browning again battles with the limitations of his words, a frustration of which he was aware at least as early as Sordello, in which he tried to forge his own new language. Browning's conviction of the truth of his efforts leads to his integrity in following

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<sup>12</sup>Fletcher, in his chapter, "Symbolic Action," explains the progress as one of the two fundamental patterns of allegory, the other being battle among the milder forms of which is the debate. I argue that a parleying falls into this latter category. See Fletcher, pp. 147-180.

his project and to his uncompromising attitude towards his public.

If the Parleyings relent to popular clamor for a poetic autobiographical confession, they do so on the poet's own terms. The conception, Dantean in its complexity, bears witness to the debt of this Englishman who spent so many years in Florence to the most famous of Florentine exiles.

If Dante is one important precursor here as well as in Sordello, Browning bows before one artist from whom he learned as much as he needed to know about allegorical depiction. In his well-thumbed and annotated edition of Gerard de Lairese's The Art of Painting in All its Branches, a chapter, marked with Browning's marginalia, is entitled "Of the Four Sorts of Tables or Ordonnances and What They Are." This chapter treats, in a conventional eighteenth-century manner, both the poet and the painter as if both artists would profit equally from the advice. In this text, an interesting misprint, corrected in ink by either Browning or his father, indicates both the care with which the book was read and a thematic confusion which the fortuitous misprint signals: "It is agreed, that a fable or ordonnance is a representation of some fact either with the pen or the pencil."<sup>13</sup> Someone has carefully turned the "f" of "fable" into its proper "t." Blending of fable with fact which the misprint points up could stand

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<sup>13</sup>Gerard de Lairese, The Art of Painting in All its Branches (London, 1778), p. 67.

for a similar blending in Browning's poetry. The book teaches Browning an ancient tradition, outmoded by the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>14</sup> which he will be able to refine into his own style. In rejecting the trappings of the emblematic paraphernalia, especially the baroque and rococo stylistics, he did not necessarily reject the entire principle behind it. Emblematic images were a way of depicting abstractions and feelings by making them visible. Browning, too, was interested in rendering the invisible and the innominate, and he learned a great deal from Lairesse's tables and ordonnances. Lairesse described four tables or ordonnances, historical, poetic, moral, and hieroglyphic:

The first is a simple and true fact. The second, a double fiction, exhibiting fabulous stories, or a mixture of deities and mortals: The third has a threefold moral; teaching our duty to God, our neighbor and ourselves: and the last is fourfold, as couching, under a short and mysterious sense, the three before going; handling vertue and vice for the benefit of soul and body, and shewing the happiness and immortality of the one, and the corruption of the other.<sup>15</sup>

Browning was particularly fond of the hieroglyphic mode. The Ring

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<sup>14</sup>Lisolotte Dieckmann, op. cit. traces the idea of hieroglyphics to its use in German Romanticism and Rosemary Freeman, op. cit., argues that, with the exception of children's books, the emblem tradition had disappeared in England. I argue that the emblem tradition is quite alive in a recognizable form in Browning if and I suspect in another though related form in Ruskin and in the Pre-Raphaelites.

<sup>15</sup>Lairesse, p. 67.

and the Book employs a hieroglyphic table both radical in its approach and viewpoint and ancient in its striving for the eternity emblemized in the meaning of the ring. In the Parleyings, Browning debates the meaning of allegory and emblems in the terms that Lairese sets forth. He asks if he can make poetry out of pure fact by writing fabulous stories or fables using history and not mythology, if he can add an extra, spiritual dimension to art, if he can uncover the emblematic mystery which lies beneath the fact. The Parleyings both gives a hieroglyphic table and argues for a modern poetry which creativity reinterprets the ancient modes. In its insistence upon the use of myth to understand daily occurrences and in its drawing a personal portrait of the artist by means of historical figures, both literary and political, the Parleyings is the precursor of modern autobiographical writing such as Joyce's Portrait and Ulysses and Pound's Cantos.

Each of the nine sections is a part of a carefully conceived whole. Browning's confidence that this work was to be his best indicates if not its actual quality at least the grandeur of its conception and the extent of its author's hopes. The enveloping myths of the Prologue and Epilogue are complimentary in theme while contrasting in myth and style. Thus, beginning and end taken together support the basically dualistic terms of the work as a whole. The opening myth is classical, Greek, and lofty in diction whereas the closing myth is medieval, Christian, and burlesque in tone. It bears an interesting similarity to the Aeolus episode in Joyce's Ulysses.

Taken together, they place the Parleyings between the poles of a debate. Browning poses a general question about the relationship between imagination, life, and salvation in an effort to reconcile his vision of Christian truth with his vision of artistic power--an effort, in other words, to reconcile Christ with Apollo.

"Apollo and the Fates:" Dualism, Light and Darkness

As introduction, "Apollo and the Fates" establishes the basic dualism, the governing imagery, and the general form which will extend over the entire work. Whereas the question posed in "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating" was whether life itself was good or evil, in this work Browning narrows his consideration to art. Is art good or evil? Is its inspiration diabolical or divine? As it may effect good, can it also potentially do evil? These dualistic concerns beget others: optimism against pessimism, legend against chronicle, fact against fiction. Such dualisms inform the image patterns, white-black, light-darkness, nakedness-covering. These oppositions engender the debate form, allowing controversy to be contained verbally, although not always decorously.

The title introduces the opposition between Good and Evil and the attendant imagery of light and darkness. The drama acts out the debate as symbolic action; Apollo argues with the fates about the ultimate good or evil of men's lives as he pleads for the life of Admetus.

The entire drama of the Prologue is set in allegorical terms. The poetic imagination which champions life, goes inward to confront fate to plead for time. The movement down--epical as in Dante and Milton, also recalls Browning's own Pauline where the poet journeys inward and finds a dark shape presiding. In a return to autobiography and inwardness, Browning compresses the movement in the Prologue to three lines in a brilliant, dizzying dive from the highest peak to the lowest hollow:

[From above.]  
 Flame at my footfall, Parnassus! Apollo,  
 Breaking a-blaze on thy topmost peak,  
 Burns thence, down to the depths--dread hollow--  
 Haunt of the Dire Ones. (11.1-4)

He arrives at the sacred place where the Fates dwell, "Dragonwise couched in the womb of our Mother." (1.5) That place, dark and mysterious, like Roland's Dark Tower, is where cosmic issues are confronted. Both the setting and the debate between Apollo--who is light, optimistic, young, naive; and the Moirai, --who are dark, pessimistic, old, cynical set up the classic poles of a dualism between which allegory rests. The particular kind of allegory of "Apollo and the Fates" does not so much involve multiple levels of meaning, although those may also be present, but is concerned with the duality of opposing and antithetical terms. Angus Fletcher explains this sort of dualism in terms that need no transposition to apply directly to Browning's Prologue:

This is not the dualism of double meanings, but dualism in its theological sense, where it implies the radical opposition of two independent, mutually irreducible, mutually antagonistic substances: in short the opposition of Absolute Good and Absolute Evil. . . . It is found in all allegories that the thematic opposition of absolutes (Good and Evil, Ignorance and Enlightenment, Doubt and Certainty or the like) is expressed by an ordering of imagery and agents which is equally dualistic.<sup>16</sup>

Fletcher labels the dogma which holds that the powers of darkness are forever at war with the powers of light as "ultimately Zoroastrian." Whereas Browning's thought cannot be traced directly to a cult source, he was interested in ancient cultic traditions and ways of symbolizing. Furthermore, he knew about Zoroastrian thought.<sup>17</sup>

The great battle of the Parleyings involves the struggle of the artist to come to terms with these oppositions if not to reconcile them. Browning suspects that the poles cannot be bridged. Occasionally, the work threatens to disintegrate in the face of impossibility. Part of its grandeur is the spectacle of battle as Browning seeks to face failure like the "heroes of old" and searches for a means to achieve a near success.

Not only does the work itself demand an allegorical reading,

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<sup>16</sup>Fletcher, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup>Browning knew something about Zoroaster. In Paracelsus, the dying philosopher addresses "Persic Zoroaster, lord of the stars" (Part V, l. 197). The star imagery in the Parleyings can be thought of as an elaboration of this line and the implications of light and darkness which it suggests.

then, one of the themes of the work as well, is the discovery of a proper artifice which will perform the task of double vision. Browning introduces a device in each of the nine sections. In "Apollo and the Fates," the artifice is wine which Apollo brings to the Fates and urges them to try it. He explains that it is the gift to man from the youngest god, Bacchus, but that it is made by "man's skill" from "earth's product" and thus is an artifice. The Fates, whose vision of life has been uniformly grim, become warmed by the wine, and their icy view modifies to include a faint possibility of love and goodness. Although perhaps art can only transmit its vision of reconciliation for a short moment before it is broken by deeper rumblings, as here when the Fates are sobered by an "explosion from earth's centre," something does happen. Art has given Admetus a chance, even if it is a chance to fail:

If Bacchus by wine's aid avail so to fluster  
 Your sense, that life's fact grows from adverse and thwart  
 To helpful and kindly by means of a cluster--  
 Mere hand-squeeze, earth's nature sublimed by Man's art--  
 (11. 171-74)

The action of "subliming" the stuff of earth's nature by making an artifice is art's work. The word, "sublime" suggests the transcending quality for which Browning's work aims. The word connotes both the lofty, spiritual sense and a quite basic scientific process which converts a solid substance into a vapour. Taken in a figurative sense, emblems "sublime" the object into spirit by taking "earth's nature" as a starting point and then by showing their spiritual meaning.

Apollo brings man's art to the Fates. The wine has wrought some change because the sobered Moirai agreed to release Admetus from death if someone will trade their life for his. The trusting god ascends, assured that he has won the day. The darker knowledge of the Fates, however, modifies the reader's picture of this radiant god who occupies a dominant place in Browning's imagery.

Apollo, in various guises, is the governing deity of the work. The sun imagery extends and varies; instead of a simple night-day opposition, at night suns in the form of stars or "suns in little," comets, and swirling light patterns illuminate the darkness when the large sun is gone. In the Prologue, however, Apollo has not achieved his full radiance. He is young, early Apollo, whose naiveté and sunny disposition blind him to certain truths and yet make him appealing. Though splendid, Apollo takes his place among those Browning figures who are self-deceived. His optimism leads him to believe wholeheartedly in the selflessness of man and in the purity of his actions.

A more idealized picture of this same god had been painted by Browning's early idol, Shelley, and it is to this pure, spiritual, idealistic sensualist that one traces the biographical roots of Browning's mature modulation of his intense and youthful passion for this great poetic figure whose influence remained emotionally closest to Browning of all poets.

In the decade before he began "Apollo and the Fates," Browning had reason carefully to re-examine his feelings about Shelley and

to reappraise his early reaction to him. The Library Edition of Shelley's works, the labor of H. Buxton Forman, began to appear in 1876, and Browning was frequently called upon by the editor for assistance. Browning responded by supplying some biographical and textual data. In appreciation, Forman sent Browning each volume as it appeared, a period of time extending from 1876-1880. His letters with Forman regarding Shelley not only indicate his thorough scholarly familiarity with Shelley's poetry, but also point up at least one continuing influence of Shelley upon Browning's late poetry. One letter concerns the relationship between Shelley's The Cenci to Browning's "Cenciaja," a poem which appeared in the Pacchiarotto volume (1876).<sup>18</sup> At least as late as 1876, then, Browning reviews and footnotes his poetic development from Shelley, a process which is akin to writing footnotes on one's own life.

Browning continued this process of emendation for at least two more years, for he added an apologetic note, dated 1878, to the flyleaf of his first copy of Shelley:

This book was given to me--probably as soon as published, by my cousin J. S. : the foolish markings and still more foolish scribblings show the impression made on a boy by this first specimen of Shelley's poetry. Robert Browning, June 2, 1878 "O World O Life O Time"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Thurman Hood, ed., Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise, (New Haven, 1933), p. 174.

<sup>19</sup>John Woolford, ed., Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, 6, (London, 1972), p. 158.

For five or six years, Browning wrote the biography of his intellectual development on the fly-leaves of books--a process both self-conscious and self-critical. The action of Browning on his library was also self-effacing since he scribbled over, scratched out with a knife, or cut-out the effusive marginalia with which the young enthusiast surrounded Shelley's poems. He did not erase all, however, and one remaining word signifies that he wished his early judgment to stand: the word "splendid" comments upon Shelley's "Hymn of Apollo."

Shelley's "Hymn," spoken by the god himself, claims great power for artistic imagination. The praise he allows to art is extravagant, even for Shelley:

I am the eye with which the Universe  
Beholds itself and knows itself divine;  
All harmony of instrument or verse,  
All prophecy, all medicine are mine,  
All light of art or nature;--to my song,  
Victory and praise in its own right belong.<sup>20</sup>

Browning does not cite this poem as a source for his Prologue. Instead, he refers to the Homeric "Hymn to Mercury" which presents Apollo as a more human, less formidable figure. The hymn gives Browning a modified Apollo, a corrective to the awesome claims of Shelley's glorious god. Shelley had also translated this hymn, a fact which Browning no doubt knew. In addition to the passage where Browning found Apollo and the Fates, the delightful hymn recounts

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<sup>20</sup>Shelley's Poetical Works, 5, ed., H. Buxton Forman (London, 1883), p. 29.

how Apollo received his lyre from Hermes whom "Phoebus swore/  
There was no God or Man whom he loved more."<sup>21</sup>

In reappraising his early love for Shelley in the years 1775-80, Browning was providing himself with the material for his autobiography. Thus, "Apollo and the Fates" is partly a parleying with Percy Bysshe Shelley. Browning's Apollo opens the poem with the invocation, "Flame at my footfall, Parnassus!" The line cleverly echoes a classic invocation to the poetic dwellers on Parnassus to aid the poet as he descends only to rise again in an epic movement and Shelley's Phoebus who boasts, "My footsteps pave the clouds with fire." (1.10)

Even though Apollo is a somewhat more dimmed god than in Shelley, Browning retains some of his splendor and contrasts the great light of his aura with the utter darkness of the Fates. The conventional rhymes "night, light, bright" of the second stanza advertise this contrast and point to the generalized conception behind it. Nonetheless, the shining view of Apollo is modified by the "night." Although, he is appealing as youth is appealing, Apollo's bounding faith in mankind is shadowed by the knowledge of the Fates that no man will offer to die for Admetus. An aspect of Browning's wisdom distrusts the reality of the sun's splendor. The Fates speak of the profound opposition between the radiant sun and the dark orb, an opposition which Browning had earlier put into the mouth of the dying Paracelsus.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., LXXIX, p. 155.

(V.11.885-93) Again, the Zoroastrian dialectic suggests the blackness that has been too little recognized as part of Browning's perception. Although good can be disguised as evil, he knows that the opposite is also a possibility:

So, even so! From without, --at due distance  
 If viewed, --set a-sparkle, reflecting thy rays, --  
 Life mimics the sun: but withdraw such assistance,  
 The counterfeit goes, the reality stays--  
 An ice-ball disguised as a fire-orb. (11.86-90)

Browning's sense of the "counterfeit" in all men and, indeed, of reality itself lies at the center of his art. Life, like the sunflower in "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," mimics the sun. But what if the sun itself is an "ice-ball disguised as a fire-orb?" This nihilistic question haunts the work, since Apollo, the governing deity himself may represent a counterfeit light. The Prologue ends with the fiendish laughter of the Fates which is only silenced by "Darkness," the last word of the section.

In his modification of his early Shelleyan enthusiasm, one can also read a palinode on Browning's belief in his own Paracelsean power to read aright the Book of Nature. Hence, the darkened palette and the diminished Apollo. Browning, nonetheless, continues to struggle heroically with his perception of the shifting nature of reality and of words. Reading the Book of Nature is much harder than he had originally thought. He remains committed to reading it, however, and he persists in his belief that the best way to convey his reading is through a blending of all arts.

Myth as Fable; Constellation as Emblem: "From the sign to the thing signified"

Implicit in the theme of "Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville" is Browning's generally well-controlled sensitivity about having good readers for his own poetry. Although he himself was loathe to act as explicator of his poems, feeling (for the most part accurately) that he had provided enough in the text for the careful reader to understand him, he naturally wanted readers who would not only admire him but would understand his poems. Resigning himself to a good readership of a happy few and leaving the explainings to the Browning Society left him with an acute sense of the disparity between admiration and comprehension. The loss of Joseph Milsand, the French critic whom Browning felt was one of the earliest and best of his readers probably emphasized this particular problem in his mind. It is thus fitting that he should dedicate this work to Milsand, who died in 1866.

The main theme of the parleying turns on the relationship between the good or right kind of reader and the correct way of writing. According to Browning, the writer seeks a way of telling the truth; he needs an "artifice" to focus his own understanding. As he explains what kind of artifice he thinks should be used, it becomes clear that he is arguing for an emblematic figure as the proper artifice and that myth used as fable can be one kind of emblematic poetry.

Thus, the good artist provides the proper signs and his perfect reader penetrates beyond the "sign to the thing signified."

After calling forth Mandeville, Browning allies himself with the eighteenth-century fabulist by asserting that both of them are not ordinary artists. He hails Mandeville from the shadowy troop as a fellow in a common quest for an understanding audience. This theme and its complement--how does an artist read the world--continue through the entire work. A good text teaches more than appears on the surface. A good reader knows this and with subtle skill penetrates to the depth of meaning. Extraordinary readers, undaunted by the opacity of words, actively seek meaning and interact with the text. Like modernist writers, such as his followers, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, Browning asks for an audience who is willing to battle difficulties of the text to penetrate beyond the covering tables. Conversely, he demands ancient writers such as Euripides who chose to read beyond the surface and who creatively reinterpret what they saw to reveal a deeper and more mysterious truth.<sup>22</sup>

The opening scene, a dark and midnight hour, emphasizes the mysterious ritual of calling up a spirit from beyond as Browning hails Mandeville as a compatriot and requests him to side with him in the

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<sup>22</sup> Euripides, like Browning, dramatized legendary characters according to their human dimensions. Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods (Princeton, 1953) in his chapter "The Moral Tradition," pp. 84-89, traces the antique tradition of allegorizing the gods.

battle for good readers:

Ay, this same midnight, by this chair of mine,  
Come and review thy counsels: art thou still  
Staunch to their teaching?--not as fools opine  
Its purport might be, but as subtler skill  
Cloud, through turbidity, the loaded line  
Of logic casting, sound deep, deeper, till  
It touched a quietude and reached a shrine  
And recognized harmoniously combine  
Evil with good, and hailed truth's triumph--  
(11.1-9)

As in the Prologue, the initial movement is downward. The image of the depths, where truth dwells, reconciling good and evil in a harmony foreshadows the later parleyings, particularly With Francis Furini, where harmony of the spheres points to a reconciliation and With Charles Avison, where harmony is the harmony of music.

Browning hails Mandeville because he made his fame by writing fables. Like Mandeville, Browning also conveyed truth by writing fables, as he illustrated in Ferishtah's Fancies. With his ally, he debates the aesthetic question of using fables, a "truth in little," as a way of teaching in literature. He avers that literature does not seek to convey new knowledge. His quest as an artist rather involves finding a form, a style, and a device for what is already known. Man in his weakness cannot encompass the whole of truth anyway; no matter how flesh strives to transcend its limitations, the whole truth must wait until "Life's rule abolished" man stands "full-statured in magnificence." (1.34)

Mandeville comes from the past to help Browning confute

Carlyle, a recently dead sage as opposed to Mandeville, a sage long-dead.<sup>23</sup> The poet longs for another fable from the author of the "Grumbling Hive." For this purpose, it is not of primary importance that Browning may have misunderstood the purport of Mandeville's fable, although that possibility remains a disquieting presence on the fringes of the parleying.<sup>24</sup> If Browning in fact misunderstood Mandeville on one level, he responded on another to a method of writing which is central to his own temperament and sympathies. Not only Mandeville, but also Voltaire takes his place in Browning's aesthetic company as part of the mapping of his vari-colored self-portrait. Mandeville's method is akin to that of Voltaire whom the young Browning read along with Shelley during his adolescent crisis. Mandeville resembles Voltaire, and not coincidentally Browning, in his delight in meretricious argument and unregenerate hypocrites. Mandeville, like Voltaire, was a fabulist and favored similar fables; both told the fable of the lion and the merchant. So, Browning, who admired and partly followed the tradition of these paradoxical fabulists, hails Mandeville as a fellow and argues for the value of the fabulist's art in this parleying: "Ah, Fabulist, what luck could I contrive / To coax from thee another "Grumbling Hive." (11. 92-93)

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<sup>23</sup>Mrs. Sutherland Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning (London, 1913), p. 342.

<sup>24</sup>DeVane, pp. 7-8.

A fabulist needs devices to teach. As in "A Bean-Stripe: Also Apple-Eating," where he sets Ferishtah in a bean-patch, Browning gives Mandeville and Carlyle a garden for their device to frame opposing fables of good and evil. Once again, the form of a psychomachia is imbedded in the terms of opposition. In this instance, optimism battles pessimism.

Browning argues for fables as a shadowing forth of a greater truth than "Man, with the narrow mind" (l. 151) can cram into his finite scope. In section seven, he presents two hieroglyphs to support his argument, a map and a constellation. Then he explains the similarity between fables and emblems. He first presents the impresa, a map of Goethe's estate in Weimar. Readers of maps, like readers of poems, need a deeper sense than merely sight to understand what they see. One needs an inner eye to light the way to truth. Browning employs traditional rhetoric of emblem writers by first drawing attention to the picture. The conceit recalls Wither's injunction to the reader in his hive emblem to employ the "eye of understanding" as well as the "eyes of sense:"

Friend, here's a tracing meant  
To help guess at truth you never knew  
Bend but those eyes now, using mind's eye too,  
And note--sufficient for all purposes--  
The ground-plan--map you long have yearned for--yes,  
Made out in markings--more what artist can?  
(11. 170-75)

An emblem is the truth "made out in markings." Similarly, a fable, a like tracing, gives the outlines of a truth. Browning betrays

annoyance at the fools who read the map literally. As he explains, if A represents House, one obviously cannot ask, where's the roof to A. (ll. 177-184) So it is with all symbols. One detects a note of scorn at the importunate crowds who besieged Browning through the mails and via the Browning Society, asking questions similar in kind to the Idiot Questioner in With Bernard de Mandeville.

Browning continues with the text but seizes upon another figure from the allegorical picture. From the map of Goethe's Estate in Weimar, an earthly emblem, he then raises his vision to the heavens and to the constellation Orion. As the map is one kind of tracing, so the constellation is a tracing in "suns." The imagery, related to Apollo and to other images of stars and flaming orbs, continues throughout the Parleyings. Here, it introduces an important emblematic configuration of the entire work. When a constellation returns in "With Francis Furini," it completes the suggestions of this first parleying. In the later parleying, the constellation is Andromeda, but the forming and reformings of flaming orbs in general represents Browning's sense of the changeability, the transcendence, and the incompleteness of art.<sup>25</sup>

Browning further expands his notion about the emblematic

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<sup>25</sup>C. Willard Smith, Browning's Star Imagery (Princeton, 1941) examines Browning's use of stars but only lists the occurrence of the images in the late poetry.

nature of poetry, using Orion as an example:

"Is joint by joint,  
Orion man-like, --as these dots explain  
His constellation? Flesh composed of suns--  
How can such be?" exclaim the simple ones.  
Look through the sign to the thing signified--  
Shown nowise, point by point at best descried,  
Each an orb's topmost sparkle: all beside  
Its shine is shadow: turn the orb one jot--  
Up flies the new flash to reveal 't was not  
The whole sphere late flamboyant in your ken!  
(11.188-97)

The orb which shines to reveal a truth but also leaves the rest in darkness is similar to the image in "A Bean-Stripe" where the flying orb casts light but by doing so emphasizes the ambient darkness. The orb, insufficient to light the world, needs to be turned to flash out new illuminations. The rays of the orb, as in Paracelsus, yield a cumulative spender. Each fable can ray out an aspect of the white light of truth. The constellation is composed of the "suns" which signify the flesh of truth.

The similarity between Browning's insight here and the aim of much contemporary structuralist thought about the nature of language is striking. Anthony Wilden, in his Preface to Jacques Lacan's The Language of the Self, cites Browning's lines beginning with "Flesh composed of suns." Browning's search for a focusing artifice is similar to Lacan's need to find a "new geometry," as he calls it, new diagrams to map the relationship of words to the symbolic functioning of the mind.

Browning explains the geometry of the constellation in the same

terms he later used to justify reading the Iliad in "Development."

As a map or a constellation are emblems, a shorthand of inner truths, myth can also be read emblematically. Turning the myth into fable, that is, interpreting it allegorically, makes one read it the way one reads an emblem. Reinterpreting myths according to moral precept is an ancient, classical tradition which was earnestly followed in the Renaissance but which goes back at least as far as the Stoics.<sup>26</sup>

In the concluding sections of the parleying, Browning carries on this tradition as he presents his own interpretation of the myth of Prometheus. Before he gives the myth, however, he justifies it in terms of his characteristic opposition between fact and fancy:

"What need of symbolizing? Fitlier men  
 Would take on tongue mere facts--few, faint and far,  
 Still facts not fancies: quite enough they are,  
 That Power, that Knowledge, and that Will, --add then  
 Immensity, Eternity: these jar  
 Nowise with our permitted thought and speech.  
 Why human attributes?"

A myth may teach:

Only who better would expound it thus  
 Must be Euripides not Aeschylus. (11.198-206)

Browning allies himself with Euripides who, unlike Aeschylus, allowed himself to reinterpret the classical myth rather than to confine himself to orthodox reiterations.

When he turns in section XI to his own retelling of the Prometheus myth, he both illustrates the aesthetic theory that a myth

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<sup>26</sup>  
 Seznec, p. 92.

or fable can be used to teach by interpreting it allegorically and continues his argument against Carlyle. The concluding myth of "With Bernard de Mandeville" is thus an illustration of his poetic theory in its form and a continuation of his argument with Carlyle in its content. Myth can be a flash of the orb of truth. In regard to his debate with Carlyle, he shows that if one turns an orb, what appeared to be evil is changed into good.

Moreover, the myth of Prometheus is a turning of the original myth of Apollo from the Prologue. Like the orb whose various sparkles throw off different aspects of truth, the myth of Prometheus and the sun illuminates Apollo in a different guise. No longer a naive, optimistic youth, the sun here in its full radiance serves as an emblem for that giver of light and life. The elevated language in this section fits its cosmic theme, as the sun meets unconscious earth in elemental rapture:

Everywhere  
Did Earth acknowledge Sun's embrace sublime  
Thrilling her to the heart of things (11.218-20)

Romantic nature returns the sun's rays with praise and joy, leaving Romantic man to feel "sullen, silent, aggrieved, disconsolate."

(11.231-32) Browning continues with his interpretation of the artist's promethean predicament, his longing to be the sun or at least to be completely comprehended. Since he cannot, he is doomed to feeling inadequate when he attempts "to render plain/The nature of the essence." (11.272-73)

In Browning's revision, Prometheus, an heir of Apollo, gives man myth as an artifice to bring the sun's rays into focus. Man's imagination is a way of rendering plain the mystery, "Sun's self made palpable by Man." (l. 300) Browning's Prometheus is thus an ancestor of Joyce who exalts the artist for similar reasons and who uses myth for his own creative reinterpretations.

### Chronicle as moralized history

Browning's aesthetic quarrel in "With Daniel Bartoli" centers on the kind of artifice one uses as a focus. Browning studied Bartoli, a learned and ingenious writer who employed his learning to relate saint's legends as a means of teaching Catholic doctrine and wonder for the supernatural power of belief and divine intervention. Browning's animus against the Jesuit desires from Bartoli's use of superstitious legends to reveal Christian truth and the moral workings of the universe. He does not question the use of literary means to teach a lesson. Rather, he objects to what he considers superstitious drivel. As in "With Bernard de Mandeville," this parleying expands Browning's ideas about the correct substance of literature. Bartoli, whose Symboli Transportati al Morale reflects the emblematic taste of his times,<sup>27</sup> becomes part of Browning's

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<sup>27</sup> Praz, p. 13.

self-portrait because of his emblematic tendencies. At the same time, Browning separates himself from the manner and the subject of the Jesuit's emblems. Browning argues with Bartoli's artifice not with his purpose.

After establishing the didactic purpose of art as fable in the first section, Browning then limits the sort of fable he considers appropriate. Chronicles which recount the history of actual people, serve the artist better than Bartoli's legends which depend upon supernatural miracles:

Don, the divinest women that have walked  
Our world were scarce those saints of whom we talked.  
My saint, for instance--worship if you will!  
'Tis pity poets need historian's skill:  
What legendary's worth a chronicle? (11. 1-5)

Browning tasks the Jesuit for moralizing legends instead of chronicles, but he does not argue against the chronicles teaching a higher moral truth; Browning remains close to Bartoli in holding to a didactic purpose for literature. Instead of relating legends of supernatural Saint Scholastica, Browning prefers a historically verifiable human saint.

His prejudice in favor of chronicle is indicated in his works. In The Ring and the Book, for example, elements of history made legendary, mythic, and supernatural become part of the complex telling of the "truth." Nonetheless, Browning insists upon the events as history in the basic tale and, further, his additions to it as actuality, "absolutely truth/Fanciless fact," a claim he made even more outrageously for his Paracelsus. He stands before the reader in The

Ring and the Book and, instead of presenting the real thing, begins to write an emblem as he brandishes, not a real book, but an impresa:

Here it is, this I toss and take again;  
 Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript:  
 A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact  
 Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,  
 And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.  
 (11.83-87)

Browning selects this real chronicle to moralize as opposed to the other choices in that book-stall on that fateful day in Florence:

Five compeers in flank  
 Stood left and right of it as tempting more--  
 A dog's-eared Spicilegium, the fond tale  
 O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,  
 Vulgarised Horace for the use of schools,  
 The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,  
 Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life, --  
 With this one glance at the lettered back of which,  
 And "Stall!" cried I: a lira made it mine.  
 (I. 11. 75-83)

The rejected compeers indicate the aesthetic bias of Browning. Not only does he express scorn for the Saint Somebody and Saint Somebody Else, but he also rejects the Dame aux Camillias as an unlikely sort of saint for moralizing. Instead, he selects the throbbing heart-beat of crime, and finds a human saint for moralizing in Pompolia who miraculously survives forty stab wounds to tell her legend before she is translated to another sphere and "rises" in a moral, realistic, and, for Browning, a profoundly human, apotheosis.

Returning to this same theme in his autobiography, Browning glosses the poetic which informs The Ring and the Book. The chronicle is better than a legend, "The Life, Death, Miracles of

Saint Somebody" because it is "secreted from man's life" and promotes morality on a human level. As in "With Bernard de Mandeville," Browning calls for no new knowledge but rather for a way of transmitting ancient wisdom. By championing the cause of history in "With Daniel Bartoli," he allies himself with the prejudice of his time in favor of what really happened.

In the controversy over the paintings in the Houses of Parliament, one detects a similar opposition. Unanimously agreeing that the government patronage of the arts should be directed to elevate not only the taste but the morality of the populace as well, the art committee debated about what genre of painting would best achieve these ends. The choice was narrowed to history or allegory, and by allegory was meant the depiction of abstractions, much in the style of eighteenth-century allegorical painting. Reflecting the dominant preference of the times for the actual event, the Royal Commission's Select Committee on the Fine Arts decided, in 1841, upon history, factual and direct, to illustrate "Britain's achievements in the nobler activities of mankind."<sup>28</sup> Browning's argument in "With Daniel Bartoli," although fifty years later, follows in this tradition.

The real "saint's" chronicle which Browning gives in the

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<sup>28</sup> John Steegman, Victorian Taste: A Study of the Arts and Architecture from 1830-1870 (London, 1970) rpt. from A Consort of Taste (1950), p. 132.

illustrative sections of the parleying elaborates upon Apollo's point of view in the Prologue. Bartoli's superstition, like Apollo's naïveté, fails to account for man's limitations. Apollo would ascribe saintly martyrdom to the parents, subjects, and friends of Admetus. The sad wisdom which ironically informs the conclusion of the Prologue is that Alcestis alone would sacrifice herself. In "With Daniel Bartoli," Marianne Pajot renounces, not her life, but a royal life for the sake of integrity and in the name of love. Like Pompilia and Alcestis, she comes as close to saintliness as humanity is capable. Like Pompilia's, her origins are humble, and the Duchess in describing her cannot disallow her perfection in spite of the enormous limitations of her lowly class:

Whom do the duke's eyes make acquaintance with?  
 A girl. "What, sister, may this wonder be?"  
 "Nobody! Good as beautiful is she,  
 With gifts that match her goodness, no faint flaw  
 I! the white. (11.23-27)

The grudging praise of the aristocrat for the lowly girl only serves to emphasize her perfection.

Chronicle or no, the tale reminds one of medieval stories of virtuous ladies; the patient Griseida graces the family tree of Marianne Pajot. Griselda, whose patience may try the credibility of any reader, is the center of an allegorical portrait retold by the Clerk in The Canterbury Tales. Like many early chroniclers, the clerk does not make the distinction between legend and chronicle. In the same way, the tale of Constance, related in both Chaucer and Gower, is

also an allegorized portrait of a virtuous lady. It is found in the Anglo-Norman Chronicle and purports to tell the tale of a daughter of a Roman emperor, Tiberius Constantinius. The story actually is a Märchen, the Caluminated Wife, which is known in many versions.<sup>29</sup> Genres overlap; legends, chronicle, folk-tale and myth merge in many of Browning's works as well as in Chaucer's, in spite of his insistence upon making a distinction.

In terms of his poetics, however, his insistence upon genre distinctions are important because it enables him to embed myth and its legendary dimensions in the real material of every day. His saints, being real people, can be kissed not on the feet but on the mouth. They can also be married:

Saint, for this,  
Be yours the feet I stoop to--kneel and kiss!  
So human? Then the mouth too, if you will!  
Thanks to no legend but a chronicle.  
(11.257-260)

As this parleying continues, Browning's personal life and his poetics begin to blend. Marianne Pajot resembles his own real saint, Elizabeth. He contrasts Marianne, the Good, whom he initially established as a flawless white pearl (11.25-30) with her black reptilian opposite. Her antithesis, a Medusa-like wraith, appears unbidden and threatening

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<sup>29</sup> F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston, 1957), p. 6.

in Section XVIII. All of the shades of the past are not good. The "shape" represents blackness opposed to whiteness of Marianne, again the fundamental opposition of the entire work. She is of the party of the black Fates, and she mocks the poet's weakness. Browning calls out to the shape in tones of the torment of the damned:

"Who bade you come, brisk-marching bold she-shape  
 A terror with those black-balled worlds of eyes,  
 That black hair bristling solid-built from nape  
 To crown it coils about? O dread surmise!  
 Take, tread on, trample under past escape  
 Your capture, spoil and trophy! Do--devise  
 Insults for one who, fallen once, ne'er shall rise!"  
 (ll. 287-93)

DeVane explains the autobiographical aspect of this phantasmagoric ending as a reference to his unfortunate lapse from worship at the "altar" of his memory for his wife, "the never-dying Past." (l. 310)<sup>30</sup> On the aesthetic level, moreover, Browning fits her into the aesthetic theme by making her into an emblematic representation, an anti-thetical portrait of Evil.

Since she is a historically real but nonetheless a diabolical adversary, as opposed to the fake lion of the Saint Scholastica legend (l. 246), she exemplifies Browning's argument in favor of rhetoric. She is a fitting and ambiguously triumphant adversary to the courageous but too human knight who embraces her as he reviles her:

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<sup>30</sup> DeVane, pp. 86-91.

"My queenly impudence, I cover close,  
 I wrap me round with love of your black hair,  
 Black eyes, black every wicked inch of those  
 Limbs' war-tower tallness: so much truth lives there  
 'Neath the dead heap of lies." (11. 322-26)

The tone mocks at and despairs over human imperfection. The ending of the parleying reenacts a ritual fall with a prevision of a subsequent rise in an imitation of Christ, the model for a human saint. Browning, in his humility at human frailty asks, "How could faith but fall?" (1. 315) As he closes the parleying, he looks to a completion and a human apotheosis as he banishes the ghosts with the crowing of the cock:

"Some day, and soon, be sure himself will rise,  
 Called into life by her who long ago  
 Left his soul whiling time in flesh-disguise.  
 Ghosts tired of waiting can play tricks, you know!  
 Tread, trample me--such sport we ghosts devise,  
 Waiting the morn-star's re-appearance--though  
 You think we vanish scared by the cock's crow."  
 (11. 336-42)

The prophetic ending completes both male and female legend which is made out of the stuff of history.

In spite of his rhetoric of impatience, Browning has much in common with Daniel Bartoli. He remains sympathetic with the basic moralizing impulse of Bartoli. He differs with him on the question of what kind of material the artist should employ. Nonetheless, in a sense, Browning's chronicles could be entitled, like Bartoli's legends, Dei Simboli Transportati al Morale. Browning insisted that poetry be made from reality and that it depend upon verisimilitude

and probability, but it is reality transposed into moral allegory that he gives. He renewed his faith upon the rediscovery that reality can yield miracles. His return to Zion Chapel in "Christmas Day" signals a similar commitment to the miracle hidden in the most ordinary humanity. In terms of the pattern of the Parleyings, "With Daniel Bartoli" enlarges the poetic canvas. As maps and constellations can be used emblematically, so can history. Both can fit into the poet's larger allegorical framework.

The Word as Emblem: "Real Vision to Right Language"

After having established his faith in earthly miracles, Browning next addresses Christopher Smart and finds in him an example of a literary miracle. He struggles to explain or at least to comprehend the astonishing and singular translation of Smart's ordinary, moderate talents to the extraordinary vision of his "Song to David." In parleying with Smart, Browning narrows his consideration of the meaning of an emblematic point of view from the earlier parleyings to concentrate upon how to apply this point of view to the craft of poetry.

Thus, this parleying, although the shortest of the seven, is particularly significant. It is the only one about a poet. It treats the question of how the poet can reconcile the vastness of emblematic knowledge with his limited power. Smart's astonishing ability to

transmute language into the thing it represents strikes Browning as the sort of rare miracle for which he had striven in his own poetry. By treating Smart's poetic gifts, the parleying considers the role of the poet as one of the elect who reads and then conveys his readings of earthly miracles, in short, as an emblematic poet.

In the two previous parleyings, Browning focused upon the content of the work and upon the artist's use of his materials. In this parleying, he adds a consideration of the way art can affect the reader. In order to do this, the parleying takes the form of an appreciation, that form of literary essay of which Pater is a master. In form, it exemplifies the kind of criticism which includes and subsumes the biography of the critic. Browning's experience of reading Smart is extremely complex. He responds at once with great emotional immediacy and with cool critical distance. His peculiar double reaction to reading Smart makes his evaluation troubled. He cannot quite decide whether Smart's great genius in the "Song to David" is an utterly mad accident or a divinely inspired moment. At the same time, he marvels at Smart's ability to perform a miracle of re-creation. Language became "realised" for Smart "once and only once." Browning centers his admiration for Smart's talent upon a continuing aim of his own as a poet: to make a language which would perform a miracle of transmutation.

In an effort to recreate the miraculous experience of Browning's first reading of Smart, the parleying begins with a question, a breath-

less sense of wonder, and an attendant doubt. A sense of déjà-vu stands as Browning's best explanation of his uncanny sense of having been prepared for Smart's "Song." As if he comes upon a new land, absolutely unknown yet absolutely familiar, he feels as if his soul had traveled before his body, exploring and civilizing the way. The lines of the opening section precede by hesitations and doubts in an effort to convey the wonder of the experience. According to Browning, Smart was able to make his language leap directly at the reader, bridging the gap between word and thing. Emphasizing both the immediacy of impact in Smart's poem and Browning's uneasy suspicion of the possibility of what is happening, the opening words move the reader directly into a meditation, practically into the middle of a thought, only to retreat from "seeming" to "actuality." Browning is never quite certain which is which:

It seems as if . . . or did the actual chance  
 Startle me and perplex? Let truth be said!  
 How might this happen? Dreaming, blindfold led  
 By visionary hand, did soul's advance  
 Precede my body's, gain inheritance  
 Of fact by fancy--so that when I read  
 At length with waking eyes your Song, instead  
 Of mere bewilderment, with me first glance  
 Was but full recognition that in a trance  
 Or merely thought's adventure some old day  
 Of dim and done-with boyishness, or--well,  
 Why might it not have been the miracle  
 Broke on me as I took my sober way  
 Through veritable regions of our earth  
 And made discovery, many a wondrous one?  
 (11.1-15)

Significantly, Smart is not named, as if the speaker and listener are so close that no naming is necessary. Browning betrays his worry by his vascillation between belief and doubt, dreaming and waking, body and soul, fact and fancy. In spite of his commandment, "Let truth be said!", he continues to ask vexing questions.

Part of his breathless and uncomfortable wonder comes from a simultaneous sense of discovery and rediscovery, the familiar turned into vision, instantaneous recognition. The submerged metaphor of exploration of earthly regions and wondrous discoveries recalls Keats and partly explains his presence later in the parleying. This first section owes much to Keats and in its imagery and subject echoes Keats's "On first looking into Chapman's Homer." In that sonnet about wondrous discovery (Browning's 15 lines suggest a sonnet without actually being one) Keats describes his experiences of reading a great author in terms of a metaphor of traveling in various kingdoms: his subsequent wonderment upon reading Homer, thus, is likened to a great discovery of a new land. Browning bows to Keats without copying him in the final three lines of the section.

The metaphor alters in the next section from exploration of lands to explorations of a house. The house represents Smart's oeuvre. His mansion revealed decency, and "safe mediocrity!"

The master of the mansion was no fool  
Assuredly, no genius just as sure!  
(11.24-25) .

When the explorer reaches the Chapel, however, the miracle breaks upon him. In imagery of light which both magnifies the earlier imagery of light and gives the lie to it, Browning gathers the force of his earlier celestial, stellar imagery to convey the magnificence of divinely inspired human creativity. Rather than the realms which owe fealty to Apollo, this Chapel praises another Son, whose radiance puts the sun in relative darkness:

That a star, from murk  
Which hid, should flashingly emerge at last,  
Were small surprise: but from broad day I passed  
Into a presence that turned shine to shade.  
(11.36-39)

Significantly for his poetics, Browning describes his discovery of the splendors of Smart's poem with reference to the visual arts. (Keats also referred to paintings in his poems, and may be alluding to Titian's Cortez in Chapman's Homer.<sup>31</sup>) Browning refers to "Raphael Mother-Maid" (l. 40) and to "marble's curve, canvas' hue." (l. 54). Smart's Chapel is riotously full of rich carving, gems, "beauty with magnificence," visual counterparts to his verbal magic. The catalogues of Smart's glories is designed not only to praise Smart's own catalogues but also to celebrate the power of art: "Art's response / To earth's despair." Browning's wonder resides partly in

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<sup>31</sup>See Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art (Oxford, 1967) for an examination of the relationship between Keats's poetry and painting. For the relationship of Cortez to "Chapman's Homer," see, John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters, ed. Clarence DeWitt Thorne (New York, 1935), p. 44n.

the sense of the timelessness of great art: "And all seemed old yet new." (1.53)

Smart's ability with words appears the more miraculous because it was evidently a unique phenomenon in his life. (Browning had no way of knowing about the Jubilate Agno, which was not published until 1939, but much of what he says about the "Song" could apply to that piece as well.) Smart's madness gives Browning an opportunity to mingle infernal and celestial imagery, to recollect the image of precariousness from the Prologue, and to wonder anew about the source of poetic inspiration. Once more, he establishes the basic dualism of the work as a whole, this time in terms of poetic creation:

all at once the ground  
 Gave way beneath his step, a certain smoke  
 Curled up and caught him or perhaps down broke  
 A fireball wrapping flesh and spirit both  
 In conflagration. (11.77-81)

Browning extends his original perception of how we dangle trustingly upon earth's thin crust to his understanding of the tenuousness of ordinary reality. What appears madness or sanity gives way to a visionary flame, dangerous as it is magnificent in its power to burn up and perhaps refine away the mediocrity of sanity, so evident in the rest of Smart's mansion.

Celestial and planetary images suggest not only the cosmic shock of Browning's response to the poetry and its heavenly inspiration, but also connect the dualism of this parleying to the oppositions in others. Furthermore, the suggestion of planetary influence and

correspondence which runs as a motif through the entire Parleyings recalls both the Renaissance conception of correspondence and older astrological traditions. The image suggests universal themes and reinforces Browning's repeated insistence that he seeks no new knowledge, that he wishes, rather, to take his place, like Smart, among the ancient men of old time who recounted timeless truth. In With Christopher Smart, Browning insists upon the importance of Biblical themes. Smart was astonishing not because he was utterly new but because he was able to connect the past with the present, as if the old themes were a part of the new. Smart momentarily reconciled the arts of the centuries and made them relevant to each other:

Raphael touch Leighton, Michelagnolo  
 Join Watts, was found but once combining so  
 The elder and the younger, taking stand  
 On Art's supreme.           (11. 90-94)

Browning's argument about the "touch" of greatness takes on the language of geometry with its attendant universal implications-- much the same technique that he employed in "Cleon" with the geometrical forms of the floor and the sphere emblem. The image of the spheres of past and present artists touching continues the theme of art in the past from that earlier poem and extends the meaning of the sphere emblem in it. Furthermore, imagery of the spheres enriches the celestial images of light in the Parleyings as a whole. Smart "touched in one point only" with the greats:

What if, in one point only, then and there  
 The otherwise all-unapproachable  
 Allowed impingement? Does the sphere pretend  
 To span the cube's breadth, cover end to end  
 The plane with its embrace? No, surely! Still,  
 Contact is contact, sphere's touch no whit less  
 That cube's superimposure. (11.104-110)

Smart's comet passed through the celestial realm inhabited by the visionary pair, Milton and Keats, touching both for one instant.

Browning admires Smart for two qualities: he united a past tradition with the present and he "pierced the screen/Twixt thing and word." (l. 114) Smart's title implies that his "Song" not only is dedicated to David, is owed to David, but also is added to David's Songs. His stanzas are like eighteenth-century psalms added to David's Biblical ones.<sup>32</sup> They remain an astonishing experience, as if one has been prepared for them by knowing the Psalms, but they are not the same. That is the touching of old and new which Browning describes. It was Smart's task to recreate or to "represent" the spender of the Hebrew poetry in his own language.

The importance of language to this Biblical poet can hardly be overstated. God, to Smart, had written his poem in the Book of Nature. Nature, furthermore, is more than God's poem but also is, in some sense, God's name as well. As sacred task, the poet translates the book into words. Smart makes explicit the connection

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<sup>32</sup>Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Christopher Smart's Magnificat: Toward a Theory of Representation," ELH, 41 (Fall, 1974), p. 443.

between God the poet, David the poet, and Smart the poet, a link which is as humble as it is audacious.<sup>33</sup> This kind of thinking and manner of conceptualizing is emblematic. Smart's deep knowledge of emblems goes beyond an acquaintance with emblem writers; he is a believer in the truth of emblems. The res creatae of the world are literally emblems to him. The "Song to David" gives back the created things to their creator in a glory of prayer and praise, exalted and ecstatic. The belief that to name is to praise fills stanza after stanza with faith that each creature's name and deed praises simply by being mentioned:

The world--the clustering spheres he made,  
 The glorious light, the soothing shade,  
     Dale, champaign, grove, and dell;  
 The multitudinous abyss,  
 Where secrecy remains in bliss,  
     And wisdom hides her skill.           XXI

Trees, plants, and flowers--of virtuous root;  
 Gem yielding blossom, yielding fruit,  
     Choice gums and precious balm;  
 Bless ye the nosegay in the vale,  
 And with the sweetness of the gale  
     Enrich the thankful palm.           XXIII<sup>34</sup>

The listing extends to the entire creation--fish, beasts, gems--in confidence of the holy nature of naming itself.

Browning grapples with the miracle that Smart not only had this faith in language, but that the faith worked once and only once.

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<sup>33</sup>Moira Dearnley, The Poetry of Christopher Smart (London, 1968), p. 38 ff.

<sup>34</sup>Christopher Smart, "A Song to David," Poems by Christopher Smart, ed. Robert Brittain (Princeton, 1950), pp. 210-230.

To Browning, who struggled painfully with an acute consciousness that, at least for him, word rarely penetrated to the "thing itself," Smart's ability to reach the mystery of reality merits highest praise. Smart's sacred view of the poet accords well with Browning's notions. It would partly explain why Browning selects Smart for his only parleying with a poet. Furthermore, the strong identity with the Bible as sacred language makes his choice perfectly apt and serves his purpose biographically and aesthetically since he knew and loved Smart from youth and since a specifically Christian rather than a Romantic visionary figure accorded nicely with his own poetic aims of restoring religion to the romantic vision.

Furthermore, in spite of the dissimilarity of his poetry to Browning's, Smart represents the later poet's ideal of language meeting and overcoming its limitations. The struggle to understand Smart's unique but transcendently "real" vision and the awe at its accomplishment in part define the spiritual/aesthetic affinity of the two poets. Browning describes Smart's accomplishment as one which restores to the word the majesty of the object so that there is a miraculous union between symbol and thing signified with no loss of power or immediacy:

Sense, penetrating as though rind to pith  
 Each object, thoroughly revealed might view  
 And comprehend the old things thus made new,  
 So that while eye saw, soul to tongue could trust  
 Thing which struck word out, and once more adjust  
 Real vision to right language, till heaven's vault

Pompous with sunset, storm-stirred sea's assault  
 On the swilled rock-ridge, earth's embosomed brood  
 Of tree and flower and weed, with all the life  
 That flies or swims or crawls, in peace or strife,  
 Above, below, --each had its note and name  
 For Man to know by, -- (11. 146-57)

The images of Browning's praise of Smart recalls his contemporary, Gerard Manley Hopkins in such poems as "Pied Beauty" and "As kingfishers catch fire . . ." where the diversity, the uniqueness of each creature proclaims its specialness, and, by naming itself, praises its creator. Browning's experiments with fitting language to meaning rivals his idiosyncratic contemporary. Browning, however, experienced an abiding sense of the unnamable, the "innominate," and his words struggle with their inability to fuse with the object.

That each word can be fused to what it is can be seen as one version of perfection. "Real vision to right language" is a perfect merging comparable in language to the perfect blending of souls in "By the Fireside" where the union leaves no traces of the souls' formerly double state. Here, as in the harmony of the spheres, each word is tuned to its thing so that, merely by speaking the word, one speaks in harmonious numbers. The song becomes itself perfect praise because it reenacts the miracle of the creation. Each word is "its note and name" with absolutely no discontinuity.

Nevertheless, Browning's wonder at Smart's willingness to allow the language to stand for itself is not unqualified. He departs from Smart (and Hopkins) in his unwillingness to allow the word to

stand alone as an emblem. He praises Smart's emblematic use of words, but he doubts if words themselves can be the whole of any emblem. Smart used words as if they emanated the thing itself, and Browning understands them as miraculous hieroglyphs. Nonetheless, Browning uneasily suspects that the mad poet left his emblem unfinished, without a motto. The remainder of the parleying takes up the issue of the unmoralized impresae. Browning not only struggles with Smart's single flash of genius, but his relentless questions throughout the parleying betrays unease with Smart's poetics. What, he asks Smart, does it mean to write singular, beautiful, vivid recreations? Why nothing more? Browning first asks Smart if he thought poetry consists only in reproduction:

Was it because you judged . . .  
 That who makes poetry must reproduce  
 Thus ever and thus only, as they come  
 Each strength, each beauty, everywhere diffuse  
 Throughout creation, so that eye and ear,  
 Seeing and hearing, straight shall recognize,  
 At touch of just a trait, the strength appear, --  
 Suggested by a line's lapse see arise  
 All evident the beauty, --fresh surprise  
 Startling at fresh achievement? (l. 185; 11. 187-95)

As in his letter to Milsand where he explains his ambitions for Men and Women, the above passage asserts the necessity to catch an audience through their senses in order to get them to see and hear. His own uneasiness with leaving poetics at a preliminary stage persists in the tone and substance of his remaining question. Only strength? Only beauty? Once the poet captures his audience, he

must complete his obligation to lead them beyond the objects of the world to the truth beyond it.

Browning's argument against the aestheticism of his times<sup>35</sup> emerges as a plea for a motto to accompany the emblem: "Man but hears the text/Awaits your teaching." (11.210-11) After presenting the impresa, the strengths and beauties of nature, the poet should not abjure his divine obligation to explain their meaning. As if reading a book in which the last pages have been removed, Browning objects, "What comes next? / Why all the strength and beauty?" (11.211-212)

Aside from the topical address against contemporary "arts for art's sake" poets, this final section partially resolves Browning's discomfort at the miracle of Smart's achievement. His madness may have refined Smart's vision, but his sanity was inadequate to explaining it. Browning's claims for the poet, like Shelley's, are vast. His power imposes upon him the responsibility not simply to get us to see and hear but to rule those sensations, to give them action and direction:

Nature was made to be by Man enjoyed  
 First; followed duly by enjoyment's fruit,  
 Instruction--haply leaving joy behind:  
 And you, the instructor, would you slack pursuit  
 Of the main prize, as poet help mankind  
 Just to enjoy, there leave them? Play the fool,  
 Abjuring a superior privilege?  
 Please simply when your function is to rule--  
 By thought incite to deed? (11.225-33)

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<sup>35</sup> DeVane, p. 122 ff.

Apparently Smart was more content with "word-flash" than Browning but less than those contemporaries whom Browning addresses. Smart's inexplicable madness may be the closest Browning can come to explaining the incomplete perfection (an idea which returns in With Charles Avison) of the "Song to David." Smart, after all, did more than name: he named to praise. In the naming was the praising. At the end of his "Song" the light of the earth turns into the light of the Incarnation as the sun turns into the Light of the World:

Glorious the sun in mid career;  
 Glorious the assembled fires appear;  
 Glorious the comet's train  
 . . . . .  
 Glorious--more glorious--is the crown  
 Of him that brought salvation down,  
 By meekness called Thy Son'  
 Thou at stupendous truth believed;--  
 And now the matchless deed's achieved,  
 Determined, Dared, and Done.

The power of these lines echoes in Browning's works, so that his ending, while leaving his questions partly unresolved, partly reflects the gathering radiance of Smart's finale and partly fits that homage into the general imagery of light and dark which binds his own work together. In appreciating Smart, he leaves room for his own (by implication, more sane) accomplishment as a more complete poet, one who not only praises strength and beauties but one who reconciles vision with meaning.

A Wizard and the "Salutary Artifice"

"With George Bubb Dodington," is an infernal dialogue with none of Browning's usual affection or respect for his adversary. He nonetheless continues to debate aesthetic issues. Dodington, though an inept orator depends upon the artful use of language. Putting aside moral questions, Browning plays the devil's advocate by criticizing, not Dodington's self-aggrandizing aim but his failure to achieve his diabolical goals:

--Here trip you, that--your aim allowed as right--  
 Your means thereto were wrong. Come, we this night,  
 Profess one purpose, hold one principle,  
 Are at odds only as to--not the will  
 But way of winning solace for ourselves (ll. 72-76)

As in many dramatic monologues where he allows the "sinner" his own premises, he allows Dodington his immorality. Thus, this parleying represents the dark side of the debate in the dualistic scheme of the work as a whole. Aesthetic issues take on a sinister cast yet remain central to Browning's concerns as an artist. In this parleying, as in the others, he debates the way to convey vision, to gain power over men, to find, as he phrases it here, a "salutary artifice."

Dodington or Lord Melcombe, a man of great wealth and power, was reputed to favor lies above truth and power and fame above all. Browning alters the political situation in the parleying so that he can also attack Disraeli,<sup>36</sup> but the similarity between the

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 150-157.

lies of statesmanship and the "fictions" of literature allow his observations to apply to both domains. (It seems appropriate that Disraeli wrote fiction, although Browning does not refer to it.)

In the first section, Browning reads an emblem with a bird's nest as the main figure in the impresa. The figure provides him with a means of contrasting appearance--the humble outside of the nest--with reality--its luxurious interior. For the motto, Browning implicitly draws upon the colloquialism, "To feather one's nest," and he cites a parallel text from Scripture:

"Labourers deserve their hire,  
And who neglects his household bears the bell  
Away of sinning from an infidel?" (11.16-18)

In this case, the Devil quotes Scripture. Next, Browning gives the impresa of the bird's nest. Allusion to the nest leads to various birds, "mudlarks," "eagle," "rook" and "crow" until the section ends with an exhibitionistic bird who prepares a stage to perform his sexual dance. The virtuosity in the progression of images leads the reader from figure to figure until the end where, as in a masque (or, perhaps in this case, an anti-masque), the artistic theme is revealed in the ritual dance. The actors who appear in the next section seem to follow naturally from these dramatic birds.

The next is feathered with suggestions of Browning themes, images, and other poems. It contains more than its "roughly wrought" exterior reveals. As Browning develops the text of the impresa, he makes it into an image of art, so that the actors who emerge out of

the birds at the end of the section come as a natural extension of the nest image: The progression of actors who posture on the stage recalls the "posing" of his monologue technique where the actor may assume a guise which the viewer sees through. In line 45, for example, the phrase "all for vanity" recalls one of Browning's favorite Biblical texts and one of his most popular scoundrels who also claimed the Biblical text as his own. The dying bishop in St. Praxed's Church, like George Bubb Dodington, shows misplaced concern for the material details of his final nest. He, like Dodington, centers his attention upon earthly trappings. Like Dodington too, the Bishop is a failed orator and allows his concerns to overshadow and to break through his oratory. His one confessional line "Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage," may itself be ironic. Returning in "With George Bubb Dodington," the Biblical text points to the phrase in the title, "Importance in their Day" with its reminder of the evanescence of fame and importance. Also, as it points to the strutting actors, it alludes to Macbeth and the power of the passage with its reflection on the meaningless strutting of actors on the stage of life as day follows insignificant day:

Birds born to strut prepare a platform stage  
 With sparkling stones and speckled shells, all sorts  
 Of slimy rubbish, odds and ends and orts,  
 Whereon to pose and posture and engage  
 The priceless female simper. (11.50-54)

Emblematic of Browning's poetry, the roughly wrought nest may present an apparently rude exterior; indeed, his critics had described

him in such terms. Browning's defense turns into sermon when he gives the admonition of the Preacher. Nonetheless, he invites a more careful inspection to find hidden comfort:

Peep but inside! That specious rude-and-rough  
Covers a domicile where downy fluff  
Embeds the ease-deserving architect . . .  
(11.23-25)

No mansion such as Christopher Smart's, the rough exterior protects the interior and prevents the destructive intrusion of "wind and weather" in the same way as the exterior of Browning's autobiography had protected it from the intrusion of the merely curious. The bird remains safe within "a snug interior, warm and soft and sleek."

The bird world thus offers parallels to human variety. With the help of Darwin, Browning discovers a bird, the bower-birds of Australia, who build nests for ostentation and construct a set to display themselves. The bower bird is not unlike Browning who constructed an elaborate dramatic form so that he could reveal himself while playing a poet.

As a continuation of a general contrast between outside and inside which began with the nest, Browning next forces Dodington to concede that in politics, all outside show is sham. (1.66) Section one ended with the performance of birds; section II begins with actors, whose performance on stage bears no relationship to the inner truth of their being. (1.55 ff.) By drawing an analogy between politics and drama, Browning returns the debate to aesthetic grounds. The

question of "reality" or what is sincere has been a question not only for readers of Browning's verse, but for Browning as well. The lines recall Browning's admonitions about the dramatic nature of his verse. He vigorously denied the thoughts of his characters as thoughts of his own. Contrast between exterior as poem and interior as poet invoked dramatic analogies. The sense of duality and discontinuity between the writer and his poem is not unlike the difference in this parleying between the politician as public performer and as private person. Browning's sense of the sham in all art and indeed the shaman in all artists is one of his enduring and most profoundly moving perceptions.

In "With George Bubb Dodington," he presents not only Browning's thoughts on the Victorian political scene but also contains a debate on artistic style as deception. Morality aside, how can the artist, even if a con-artist, achieve his ends? Style, as a means of achieving in the outside world inner brooding powers is a struggle for the poet as well as for the politician.

Although not a problem in Dodington's eighteenth century when both poet and politician needed to please a patron, power in Browning's age was granted by the public. Therefore, Browning changes focus in the parleying from historical accuracy to the conditions of his own age. Rather than worrying about pleasing a patron, he makes Dodington have to please a public. For Browning, especially, the public granted its favors after an arduous and frustrating courtship. Although Browning's exile in Italy allowed him to escape much of the

humiliation of powerlessness, his desire for a public to read his verse and his frustration at not being liked by the British Public occasionally break through his reserve. The Ring and the Book, for example, opens and closes with a challenge to the "British Public," as if Browning wrote a masterpiece daring them to understand it:

Well, British Public, ye who like me not,  
(God love you!) (I, 11. 410-11)

So, British Public who may like me yet,  
(Marry and amen!) (XII, 11. 831-32)

For Browning to gain the public without either losing his artistic integrity or revealing too much of his self, he had to discover a style, a way of controlling his language. He seeks a "salutary artifice." The tone of contempt for the trickster and the ironic stance of the parleying as a whole partially disguises how closely Browning's concerns here apply to his own art. In Section III, he gives a diabolical or infernal ars poetica:

You say "Make shift  
By sham--the harsh word: preach and teach, persuade  
Somehow the Public--not despising aid  
Of salutary artifice--we seek  
Solely their good: our strength would raise the weak  
Our cultivated knowledge supplement  
Their rudeness, rawness: why to us were lent  
Ability except to come in use?  
Who loves his kind must by all means induce  
That kind to let his love play freely, press  
In Man's behalf to full performance!"  
(11. 109-119)

The march of progress and evolution suggested by the reference to Darwin in Section I returns in Section IV. Befitting the infernal

aspect of the dialectic, the problem is cast in appropriately perverted terms. Lies improve as well as truth. False words and disguises, the art of deception, must keep up with the times:

Try simple falsehood on shrewd folk who forge  
Lies of superior fashion day by day  
And hour by hour? With craftsmen versed as they  
What chance of competition when the tools  
Only a novice wields?           (11.123-27)

Power to deceive like poetic power, lies within. The strength of evil also requires a "salutary artifice." Since force and wit cannot be employed, the politician requires "craft." (11.154-55) And since the world has evolved, simple craft will not suffice. In terms similar to "Cleon" and with a similar evolutionary problem, the con-artist seeks a more complicated "trick" to keep up with the evolved mind of the masses. Browning uses the word "composite" (1.161) to describe the required complexity, a word he also used in "Cleon" to explain the advanced multiplicity of the contemporary mind. Browning formulates the modern dilemma as it applies to artists as well as to other deceivers:

As simple force has been replaced, just so  
Must simple wit be: men have got to know  
Such wit as what you boast is nowise held  
The wonder once it was, but, paralleled  
Too plentifully, counts not,   (11.174-78)

At the point when all ordinary tricks fail to exert enough power, Browning turns to the supernatural. Artists need a touch of mystery. In this case the mystery is diabolical. Like the deceptions of Sludge, the Medium, they are crass. Nonetheless, Browning

retains the right to reserve for Sludge and others, a touch of mystery, a power that extends beyond explanation. He introduces the supernatural as the artifice of the gifted wizard. In the modern age, however, acting the wizard is not easy. Gone are the pomp, the robe, the book of ancient Merlins and Prosperos: "New wizard-craft makes shift/Nowadays shorn of help by robe and book." (11.195-96) One must convey the supernatural without being able to look the part.

Browning saw his problem as a poet in similar terms. His intensest nature, as he described it in Pauline, felt its power, brooding and awesome, and needed to find a way to expend its force. Browning's sense of his own divinity, his poetic fortune, needed a salutary artifice by which he could move and sway the public. Without it, the power is wasted and fades to obscurity. He felt his own understanding of the workings of the universe to be at least akin to a divine gift if not of divine origin. His uncanny sense that some previous knowledge had prepared him for Smart's vision was not unique to his experience of reading Smart. Indeed, he describes his sense of mystery within in Paracelsus as a version of divine insight. His search for an artifice that would not compromise his vision yet would gain him an audience stretches over most of his poetic career.

In "With George Bubb Dodington," he reveals his understanding that diabolical and divine missions can appear uncomfortably similar. The ancient wizards, Agrippa and Paracelsus, had ancient tricks at hand, and could invoke charms, alchemy, and spells as a way of

making impalpable mystery understandable to the uninitiated.

Ancient modes of allegory were also able to employ artifice in a way that modern readers would no longer accept. Both celestial and infernal art require modern dress which makes the task of the artist more difficult:

Somebody comes to conjure: that's he? Pish!  
 He's like the roomful of rapt gazers, --there's  
 No sort of difference in the garb he wears  
 From ordinary dressing, --gesture, speech,  
 Deportment, just like those of all and each  
 That eye their master of the minute.

(11.199-204)

The conjuror is the infernal version of the artist who leaves stirrings of wonder and uneasy doubt in his audience: "Doubtless, out of date / Are dealings with the devil: yet. . ." The impostor who wears his disguise with aplomb holds great fascination. In him one finds the art and the artist united. In diabolic terms, he has found the salutary artifice, "something--call it how you may-- / Uncanny in the--quack," (11.205-206) which allows him to convey the "old mystery." His robes are like other men's but he conveys his powers by other means.

To emphasize the frightening aspects of the infernal side of the debate, Browning returns to the awesome image of men as puppets from "Apollo and the Fates." The passage echos Atropos' speech of glee as her shears cut the tangled strings of "life's substance" and "shriek" with each snap:

One more  
 Mortal makes sport for us Moirai who dangled  
 The puppet grotesquely. (11.22-24)

The final image in "With George Bubb Dodington" shows the successful quack manipulating men in the same manner as the Fates:

No use  
 In men but to make sport for you, induce  
 The puppets now to dance, now stand stock-still,  
 Now knock their heads together, at your will  
 For will's sake only--while each plays his part  
 Submissive . . . (11.332-37)

These grotesque versions of artists nonetheless share Browning's own interest in manipulating the responses of his audience. He faces them in Sordello with his pointing pole in hand, but he lacked the wizardry to control them. The last passages offer an opposing myth to the Promethean myth of "With Bernard de Mandeville." The salutary artifice replaces the focusing artifice. Taken together, they help to define the moral dialectic which sets the terms of Browning's aesthetics. With the potential for great good and great evil inherent in them, they serve as the opposition of Browning's Psychomachia.

Andromeda and the Ouroboros: "Penetration of the Mystery"

The longest of the parleyings, "With Francis Furini," appears to be dealing with two unconnected themes: the propriety of painting nude women and the philosophy of the "Evolutionists." Browning defends the former and attacks the latter. The apparent duality of subject and audience results in the most didactic, multi-leveled and puzzling of the seven parleyings. If one considers Browning's over-riding aesthetic concerns, however, the two apparently unrelated

aspects of the parleying can be reconciled. He frequently connected art and evolution in his poems, first in Paracelsus, in "Cleon," and in many of the parleyings, to name only a few examples. Browning's concerns about the evolution of art and his consequent position in the aesthetic hierarchy defines the conflict of the debate. "Evolution" here connotes not only progress but the rationalistic, scientific point of view. In this crucial parleying, Browning deals with the occult origins of his emblematic verse and seeks at least a partial resolution of the conflict. He argues for uncovering the mystery, for creating the perfect emblem out of the objects of nature. He makes explicit the corrections in his art between his emblematic images and his deepest convictions about the allegorical nature of art.

In one sense, this section can be read as an elaboration and a gloss on "Cleon" in which his emblematic ars poetica was suggested and illustrated. Continuing the dualities in "Cleon," the doublings in this parleying are so profound that they permeate the structure of the language, images and themes. Browning reveals the relationship between his poetics and ancient hieroglyphic traditions. With the emergence of the ouroboros in section X, the relationship which had only been suggested is made explicit. One of the occult symbols for completion and eternity and the mysteries of those concepts is the ouroboros, the serpent with the tail in its mouth. The tensions of duality can be resolved by this mysterious circle whose total meaning

can never be fully articulated.<sup>37</sup>

Browning carefully structured this parleying to balance argument with wonder. Whereas the tone seems strident, didactic, and prosaic, the images are cosmic and mysterious. His outbursts of anger against art critics not only reflect his sense of outrage at his son's reception by critics but also express his own frustration at being misunderstood. As DeVane has carefully documented, the historical issues refer to Pen Browning and to the response given him by prudish critics, a response specifically against his painting of a nude Joan of Arc bathing.<sup>38</sup>

The issues raised in this parleying, however, extend to Browning's beliefs about his own art. His relationship to his son's art is never merely paternal--or rather it is so paternalistic that the son's art and the father's ambitions at times become indistinguishable. Pen's painting of St. Joan illustrates this blurring of the margins between son's art and father's vision. The subject of the painting was suggested to the painter by the poet, who also provided verses in the catalogue. Those accompanying verses surface again in this parleying. (ll. 601-607)<sup>39</sup> Pen's picture thus represents the poet's inspiration as if the son merely provided the brush-work for

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<sup>37</sup>Lisolotte Dieckman, Hieroglyphics (St. Louis, 1970), p. 29.

<sup>38</sup>DeVane, pp. 181-84.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

the poet's pen.

This blending is a close approximation of Browning's wish to be both a poet and a painter. He achieved the wedding on a verbal level in many poems, but in this instance he has an actual painting, his subject, his words. The situation resembles the theme of "One Word More" and reflects his interest, as in "Cleon," in an artist who has mastered the entire compass of Art. Thus, when Browning addresses Furini in section I he contrasts him to Michaelangelo, specifically in regard to the greater artist's prowess as a poet as well as a painter. Michaelangelo as painter-poet--Browning labels him "doubly-endowed"--is only one of the doublings which occur in this first section. Furini himself fulfills two roles of the artist: his is painter-priest, a function which serves later in the religious-aesthetic prayer and sermon of sections VII, IX, and X.

A suggestion of the various meanings of "nakedness" also occurs in this opening section as Browning removes the "priestly vesture" of Furini in order to examine his accomplishments as a "mere man." This apparently casual act of uncovering stands at the beginning of the parleying as a model for the other sorts of uncoverings which the poet claims as his province. As an emblematic poet, Browning conceives of his duty as uncovering the mysteries of the earth to discover truth. By putting into words what for Furini was a single act--that of making images--Browning completes the emblem.

In this section, Michaelangelo represents one kind of artist

who in himself can resolve the duality of word and picture. His double endowment (l. 44) earns him the appellation "miraculous Michael." Word and picture taken together perform a miracle. Furini is a counterpart to Smart who presents verbal pictures without the words which will complete the miracle. Furini's "ample gift," though limited, establishes him as a worthy subject for the poet's praise. Unlike Michaelangelo, who needed no "poet's pen" because he had his own, Furini requires completion by words which will make the message whole. DeVane points out that of all the men of the Parleyings, Furini is the only one who wrote nothing.<sup>40</sup> His wordlessness thus needs Browning's words for completion.

The poet's words praise Furini, who used his art to "praise Heaven and bless earth." (ll. 57-58) Browning's variations upon the word "praise" in the parleying suggest connections between art and devotion. He divides the parleying into the devotional elements of a religious service, a prayer of praise and thanksgiving (VII) a sermon (X), and a psalm (XI). Browning completes the priest's essentially earthbound art by giving it a devotional and transcendent truth.

After discovering the devotional truth, the *dévo*t, as poet, makes it known by uncovering it. Hence, the motif of nakedness. Nude women represent, as an impresa to an emblem, the idea of the "naked very thing." When they are united with the celestial images

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<sup>40</sup> DeVane, p. 167.

they come to symbolize the mystery and completeness of truth. The orb is both a star and a circle, another mysterious symbol of the poet's craft. By combining the image of the star with the Andromeda, a nude woman and a major motif in his poetry since Pauline, Browning unifies the body of his poetry. In an enormous act of completion, Andromeda comes into the poem as a heavenly constellation. She is used in section III as an emblematic image. She returns in the sermon (X) as Browning himself. By representing the Maker's work as constellation, the painter/poet's work as picture, and the artist/dévot's existential precariousness, she contains the aesthetic-devotional meaning in one image. Her nakedness is emblematic of truth.<sup>41</sup>

In section III, Browning rejects any suggestion that Furini ever intended to burn his nude paintings. His art was praise, and he could not have renounced his personal way of praising. This priest's paintings

record, in each rendered loveliness,  
That one appreciative creature's debt  
Of thanks to the Creator more or less,  
Was paid according as heart's-will had met  
Hand's-power in Art's endeavour to express  
Heaven's most consummate of achievements, bless  
Earth by a semblance of the seal God set  
On woman his supremest work.

(11.128-134)

After establishing the relationship of "creature" as dévot, giver of

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<sup>41</sup>Caesare Ripa, Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery: The 1758-60 Hertel Edition of Ripa's Iconologia with 200 Engraved Illustrations, ed., Edward A. Maser (New York, 1971), p. 50.

thanks to the creator by means of praising his supreme creation "the naked female form" (1.143), Andromeda appears as an emblem of creation, not only of the deity's but of the artists' as well. Andromeda, who was a subject of a Furini work, is Browning's most enduring symbol.<sup>42</sup> As she appears, outlined in the heavens as well as in the lines of the painter and the lines of the poet, she clarifies Browning's meaning and functions as an emblem which governs the entire parleying. The completed impresa contains the figures of the star, the nude figure of Andromeda and a dark hem of a mountain precipice. The snake meances. In section III, Browning presents the first parts of the emblem, Andromeda as constellation and explains the relationship between the heavenly tracing and the work of the artist who

Agonized to adumbrate, trace in dust  
That marvel which we dream the firmament  
Copies in star-device, when fancies stray  
Outlining, orb by orb, Andromeda--  
God's best of beauteous and magnificent  
Revealed to earth--the naked female form.

(11.138-43)

The gathering together of "orbs" from the star images of the entire Parleyings into a constellation stills the restless movement of meaning that Browning struggles to contain in words. An emblem of Andromeda represents an example of the artifice that has been his quest. If one looks back fifty years to the Andromeda in Pauline, one

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<sup>42</sup>William C. DeVane, "The Virgin and the Dragon," Yale Review XXXVIII (1947), pp. 33-46.

finds that she represented permanence and the stilling of flux and doubt in art. Browning develops the suggestions and images from that earliest work in a similar context. In this respect, his oeuvre as a whole is surprisingly continuous.

In Pauline, Andromeda contrasts with the questing poet whose paralyzed artistic life does not bring permanence. He is a "still-decaying frame," whose stillness belies rather than transcends the activity of time. Browning's continual revulsion at his own temporality oppressed him even as a youth as he addresses Caravaggio's Andromeda, the picture he had before him as he wrote:

Andromeda!  
 And she is with me; years roll, I shall change,  
 But change can touch her not--so beautiful  
 With her fixed eyes, earnest and still, and hair  
 Lifted and spread by the salt-sweeping breeze,  
 And one red beam, all the storm leaves in heaven,  
 Resting upon her eyes and hair, such hair,  
 As she awaits the snake on the wet beach  
 By the dark rock and the white wave just breaking  
 At her feet; quite naked and alone;  
 (11. 656-665)

At the end of his career, his frame still decaying, Browning continued to find in Andromeda an appropriate image for his art. Rather than envisioning himself as Perseus,<sup>43</sup> however, he acknowledges his identification with Andromeda as he extends the meanings of this central figure of the emblem. The painting of Andromeda, like

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Browning's poems, is exposed to blockhead critics such as Balducini. The artist then feels like Andromeda naked, exposed and alone. His existential position is likened to Andromeda's as he balances on the rocky ledge between evil and ignorance.

The image of Andromeda returns in the sermon (X) where Browning uncovers further meanings of the image and completes the emblem with a revelation of the mystery embodied in Andromeda and the snake. Browning prepares for the ultimate uncovering in the five preceding sections where he banishes the evil critics whose understanding is veiled by prurient interests. As part of the dualism of the work as a whole, they represent evil. Like other failed questers whose sins prevent them from achieving their ends, the sensualists who can see nothing in art beyond the titillation of their gross flesh must be dealt with before the sacred mystery can be revealed.

Thus, in section V, various sorts of coverings, clouds, mists, and fogs hide the truth. Those failed of vision cannot see beyond the coverings or, worse, prefer them to the hidden star. The uninitiated fall into various categories:

the uninstructed ones too sure  
 Would take all outside beauty-film that's furled  
 About a star--for the star's self, endure  
 No guidance to the central glory, --nay  
 (Sadder) might apprehend the film was fog,  
 Or (worst) wish all but vapour well away,  
 And sky' pure product thickened from earth's bog--  
 (11.193-98)

The image of the failed questers, the "worthiest" who failed

"to trust their own soul's insight" plays a subtle variation on one of the themes of "Childe Roland." So, too, their too heavy reliance upon head and hand recalls the incomplete task of Paracelsus who sought to open up a way to allow inner light to escape:

why? except  
 For warning that the head of the adept  
 May too much prize the hand, work unassailed  
 By scruple of the better sense that finds  
 An orb within each halo, bids gross flesh  
 Free the fine spirit-pattern, nor enmesh  
 More than is meet a marvel custom blends  
 Only the vulgar eye to. (11.201-207)

The language echoes a key epistemological passage in Paracelsus:

There is an inmost center in us all,  
 Where truth abides in fullness; and around  
 Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
 This perfect, clear perception--which is truth.  
 A baffling and perverting carnal mesh  
 Binds it. (Pt. I, 11.728-33, my italics)

Although it took Browning fifty-two years, making the words rhyme affirms the important imagery. Like fleshly coverings, "film flakes" cover the light of truth. Browning uncovers himself in the role of adept as he ritualistically prepares to complete the quest he initiated at the beginning of his career. First, in section VI, he banishes the vulgar. "Go elsewhere," Hence with you!" Next, he commands, "Pray, Furini!" The prayer explains the function of art as prayer: "In Art the soul uplifts/Man's best of thanks!" (11.233-34) Too often, artists pervert the perfection of the human form as reflection, mask and "match for that divine." Only a few can see and reproduce the act of making so that it accurately and properly praises its maker.

The prayer, rather than giving glory to the creator, audaciously praises the artist as one who can best praise God:

No gift but, in the very plenitude  
 Of its perfection, goes maimed, misconstrued  
 By wickedness or weakness: still, some few  
 Have grace to see Thy purpose, strength to mar  
 Thy work by no admixture of their own,  
 --Limn truth not falsehood, bid us love alone  
 The type untampered with, the naked star!  
 (11. 241-47)

Without irony Browning gives a version of Johannes Agricola's heresy. He claims "grace" of being a chosen one. He has limned truth with his Andromeda, his naked star.

Having completed the preparatory rituals of banishing the demon false critics and clearing the tainted air with the prayer, Browning gives the sermon which enlarges the outlines of Andromeda and deals with the serpent. The sermon employs familiar emblematic rhetoric of pointing to the pictures. It directs the reader's eyes not only to the pictures of this poem, but also to the artist's work as a whole. On one level, the sermon argues against the vision of "Evolutionists." As in previous ages, poetry defends its manner of seeing against more "rational" views. In this regard, whether or not Browning actually understood Darwin is irrelevant to the sermon; the dualism of the Parleyings requires an adversary, and the opposition between science and poetry strikes so many ancient and contemporary issues that it is sufficient to understand the Evolutionists as representing the scientific viewpoint.

In line with the dualities of "With Francis Furini" and of the psychomachia of the entire work, the sermon falls into two sections. The first, (IX) argues against the Evolutionists by presenting their point of view. The speaker directs himself to them. In the next section, (X), he presents his own aesthetic as defense. Like the polarities of light and darkness, good and evil, truth and lies, the viewpoints of the evolutionist and the artist are opposite: "At truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights, /Our stations for discovery opposites, --" (ll.266-67) The controversy involves questions of vision, and what one sees from heights turns out to be very small. The deity can get lost in looking downward. Instead of seeing true stars, the scientist can only find poor, minimizing imitations: "--that on some insects' wing/ Helps to make out in dyes the mimic star." (ll.295-96)

In Section X, Browning develops the Andromeda image and reconciles it with the serpent. This section contains a compendium of Browning's themes and images and gives the reader a way of reading his poetry. The relationship between poet and poem is analogous to the Creator and the res creatae. As signs of his presence, they must be read emblematically as telling about him. After suggesting this correspondence in the prayer, the sermon adumbrates the various ways that the sacred relationship between creator and poet works in the poem. An artist can uncover inner truth by painting what he sees. Furthermore, the terms of the argument betray its origins in

hieroglyphic traditions. Browning/Furini points to his pictures with the repeated admonition to look, the repetition signaling the importance of the act of attention. Rather than describe the individual pictures, Browning describes his entire oeuvre; it is a composite picture, he refers to it as "man and woman," descriptive of his entire work. As emblematiser, he then uncovers their meaning, gradually stripping away the external flesh to reveal hidden marvels. Imitating the Duke of Ferrara, he draws aside the curtain to his picture gallery:

Lo,  
 My life's work! Let my pictures prove I know  
 Somewhat of what this fleshly frame of ours  
 Or is or should be, how the soul empowers  
 The body to reveal its every mood  
 Of love and hate, pour forth its plenitude  
 Of passion. If my hand attained to give  
 Thus permanence to truth else fugitive,  
 Did I not also fix each fleeting grace  
 Of form and feature--save the beauteous face--  
 Arrest decay in transitory might  
 Of bone and muscle--cause the world to bless  
 For ever each transcendent nakedness  
 Of man and woman? Were such feats achieved  
 By sloth or strenuous labour unrelieved,  
 --Yet lavished vainly? Ask that underground  
 (So may I speak) of all on surface found  
 Of flesh-perfection! Depths on depths to probe  
 Of all-inventive artifice, disrobe  
 Marvel at hiding under marvel, pluck  
 Veil after veil from Nature--were the luck  
 Ours to surprise the secret men so name  
 That still eludes the searcher--all the same  
 Repays his search with still fresh proof--'Externe,  
 Not inmost is the Cause, fool! Look and learn!  
 Thus teach my hundred pictures:

(11. 376-401)

The marvel resides in the "all-inventive artifice." It contains all the mystery that man can know. Everything outside of self and the search for self-knowledge leads to the void. Again, Browning expresses his sense of the insubstantiality of external reality. One step beyond, even on firm earth, and the darkness swallows man. One false step and he dangles over the chasm held up only by the whim of the Fates. If he extends his foot beyond, he encounters the great cosmic insubstantiality: "At touch of what seemed stable and proved stuff/Such as the coloured clouds are." (ll. 404-405)

In the foregoing passage, Browning insists that his own self-knowledge leads his artistic power to arrest flux. He is the hierophant who plucks "veil after veil" from nature. He thus prepares for the metamorphosis of self to picture as he becomes his own Andromeda whose position chained to the rock reflects his own precarious plight. He describes his insecurity, a dizzying sense of uncertainty when he quests for knowledge beyond himself: a "profound of ignorance surges round/My rock-spit of self-knowledge" (ll. 409-410). Chained to a precipice, the best a poet can do is to strike out lamps, "spark after spark of truth" (l. 415) to illumine the darkness.

The light-dark images lead beyond prayer to revelation and reconciliation. Browning points to his Andromeda "exposed on strand/At mercy of the monster" (ll. 490-91) with no one to help her. To the objection that she is only a picture, "false," mere fancy-work of paint and brush, Browning as Furini bemoans his lack of wizard craft

to convince sceptics that art is a kind of reality:

Were mine the skill, the magic, to impress  
 Beholders with a confidence they saw  
 Life, --veritable flesh and blood in awe  
 Of just as true a sea-beast, --would they stare  
 Simply as now, or cry out, curse and swear,  
 Or call the gods to help, or catch up stick  
 And stone, according as their hearts were quick  
 Or sluggish? Well, some old artificer  
 Could do as much, --at least, so books aver, --  
 Able to make-believe, while I, poor wight,  
 Make-fancy, nothing more. (ll. 494-504)

Old artificers, necromancers of Agrippa's time, were true artists who combined science with art. The contrast between "make-believe" and "make-fancy" measures the distance between ancient makers and new ones. Browning can come close to these ancient magicians if he can complete the promise of Furini's images. In addition, a maker of fancies must finally rest his powers upon what he has personally known and felt. Unlike a scientist, he can prove nothing, but in pointing to Andromeda he can teach something about man's fate. Browning pleads for human limited knowledge, acknowledgment of that limitation and, beyond that, faith in the ability of art to the bounds of that limitation. In the final vision of the sermon, Browning, as emblematic poet, points to the figure of Andromeda. Although he has celebrated the role of Perseus in the past, both in his life and in his poetry, instead of slaying the menacing sea serpent, this time he places its tail in its mouth. By transforming the dragon, symbol of evil, to the ouroboros, symbol of eternity, he reconciles evil with good. His poetic act imitates his belief that profound knowledge can

discover good in apparent evil. With the gesture of the emblematic poet, he draws the reader's gaze to Andromeda:

Look upward: this Andromeda of mine--  
 Gaze on the beauty, Art hangs out for sign  
 There's finer entertainment underneath.  
 Learn how they minister to life and death--  
 Those incommensurably marvellous  
 Contrivances which furnish forth the house  
 Where soul has sway! Though Master keep aloof,  
 Signs of His presence multiply from roof  
 To basement of the building. Look around,  
 Learn thoroughly, --no fear that you confound  
 Master with message! He's away no doubt,  
 But what if, all at once, you come upon  
 A startling proof--not that the Master gone  
 Was present lately--but that something--whence  
 Light comes--has pushed him into residence?  
 Was such the symbol's meaning, --old, uncouth--  
 That circle of the serpent, tail in mouth?  
 Only by looking low ere looking high  
 Comes penetration of the mystery.

(11.528-547)

In the foregoing passage, Browning once more presents his emblematic philosophy of art. Beauty attracts attention and then gives news of the "finer entertainment" underneath. The emblematic poet gives figures, the "furnishings" of spiritual truth. In this passage, he calls aesthetic artifice, "contrivances;" their aim is to lead the reader through delight in the contrivance to the spiritual truth "beneath." Contrivances are the rays which Browning gathers, but their source is the light of mystery, spiritual truth. The ouroboros, ancient hieroglyph, appears as a proof beyond rationality, an old and uncouth way of knowing. Man first finds spiritual meaning in the lonely forms of nature. Browning begins by commanding the attention upward but

ends by insisting upon the importance of "looking low."

Although he has prepared for its appearance by earlier allusions to serpents, Browning produces the ourobouros unexpectedly. It does not arise logically or associationally from the images which precede it. Its appearance is magical; by producing it, Browning becomes like an "old artificer" who wears the mystic robes and uncovers naked reality. Thus, with his emblematic art, he claims fulfillment of ancient magic.

#### "Seeing Double:" Vision and Sight

From the burst of purifying flame in "With Francis Furini" which transforms the bathing Joan of Arc and, with her, the "human shape divine," (l. 162) Browning moves to Gerard de Lairesse and a light which illumined his blindness. Browning knew Lairesse's book, The Art of Painting in All its Branches by heart when he was a boy, and, in 1874, wrote an inscription on the fly-leaf of the book. At that time, he had occasion to reexamine his debt to the blind-painter who was able nonetheless to open eyes of aspiring artists. Thus, the question of artistic vision assumes a central place in this parleying. Gerard de Lairesse, the blind painter, provides the center for a series of meditations on vision and progress in the arts. Homer, blind, Greek and ancient, hovers over the meditations and

serves as a measure for artistic accomplishment.<sup>44</sup> Browning seeks finally to validate his own vision, to claim value for modernity, to incorporate and thereby to overcome the great poet forebearers of ancient days. The terms again recall "Cleon." Evolution, in this parleying, is aesthetic progress. "With Gerard de Lairese" seeks to prove that Browning can incorporate ancient ways and create modern poetry. In making it new, he makes way for modern poetry, he makes space for himself on Parnassus, and he gives encouragement to future artists who follow him.

The opening address to blindness implicitly contrasts actual sight to inner vision. Lairese both painted realistic human beings and his own interpretation of mythological creatures:

Ah, but--because you were struck blind, could bless  
Your sense no longer with the actual view  
Of man and woman, those fair forms you drew  
In happier days so duteously and true, --  
(ll. 1-4)

Browning faintly praises Lairese's duteous and true depictions, but he leaves the impression that the realistic portraiture as outlined by Lairese's brush left out what he would call "soul." Lairese separated intangible from realistic by separating the demonic and the celestial and giving them corporeality:

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<sup>44</sup> DeVane, p. 231; 244-49, finds that the sources in this section are mainly Greek as opposed to Lairese's preference for Latin sources.

He was hindered too  
 --Was this no hardship? --from producing, plain  
 To us who still have eyes, the pageantry  
 Which passed and passed before his busy brain  
 And, captured on his canvas, showed our sky  
 Traversed by flying shapes, earth stocked with brood  
 Of monsters, --centaurs bestial, satyrs lewd, --  
 Not without much Olympian glory, shapes  
 Of god and goddess in their gay escapes  
 From the severe serene: or haply paced  
 The antique ways, god-counselled, nymph-embraced,  
 Some early kingly personage,  
 Such wonders of the teeming poet's-age  
 Were still to be.       (11.5-18)

As in the "Parleying With Daniel Bartoli," Browning gives himself the task of reconciling the two kinds of vision, and of achieving the reconciliation on the real earth without the help of supernatural creatures. Browning seeks a creative interpenetration of ancient classical modes of expression and his own. Whereas he claims to free himself from classical vision, he knows how tied he is to it. In "By the Fireside," he pictures his long dark autumnal evenings reading Greek; he actually fulfilled his prophecy by reading and translating Greek plays in his later years. Therefore, his opposition to classical literature and his strong assertion that progress in time can bring improvement in style has to be read in the context of an artist defending the future possibilities for art; Browning fights for modernity, for new styles.

One of Lairese's influences was Cesare Ripa whose Iconologia was a basic emblematic handbook for two centuries. It described conventional ways of depicting abstractions and was intended not only

for writers and painters but for designers of festivals and funerals as well.<sup>45</sup> Lairese acknowledges Ripa as the one who renewed his interest in emblems and how to use them. Upon receiving the Iconologia as a gift, he admits, "My flame for emblematic learning broke out again. By the help of this book I produced many and strange designs, which for their singularity were accounted as prodigies or dreams."<sup>46</sup>

Browning objects to Lairese's dreams because they ignored reality. The Dutch artist turned Holland into Dreamland. (1.65) as he turned everything into emblem. Nonetheless, Browning still values the basic advice of Lairese who, on the "Walk" in chapters V and VI of his volume, taught his pupils how to see things in Nature:

But--oh, your piece of sober sound advice  
That artists should descry abundant worth  
In trivial commonplace, nor groan at dearth  
If fortune bade the painter's craft be plied  
In vulgar town and country! (11.52-56)

Browning pleads for an acceptance of the "ugly actual" of reality but wishes to retain a sense of mystery in the actual. He strongly objects to the notion that what is common is worth no-wise a glance. The "daily and undignified" can be the stuff of modern myth.

The difference between Lairese and the modern emblemist is that the air does not have to be peopled with representations of

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<sup>45</sup>Ripa, p. vii.

<sup>46</sup>Lairese, p. 54.

abstractions for the abstractions to exist. The Victorian writers Tennyson and Arnold used ancient garb, both medieval and classical, as a way of looking at Victorian society. Browning's contribution to Victorian allegorical modes is his insight that "abundant worth" occurs at the intersection between the mundane, "trivial commonplace" and the mythological. From such understandings springs modern allegory. Thus, Andromeda lives in Pompilia; Ulysses in Leopold Bloom; Oedipus, and Narcissus in all men. The great moral lesson which Browning aspires to teach resides in the muck and mire of vulgar town and country.

As in the previous parleyings, Browning worries about his ability to resurrect the myths without their familiar trappings. As the wizard's robe no longer is the fashion, so one must work with a denuded world. To see double in the modern world requires more of Lairese and his hieroglyphic ordonnance than Browning acknowledges. When Browning takes a walk he, unlike Lairese, tramps "earth's common surface, rough, smooth, dry or damp," but he nonetheless understands the blind painter's desire to transcend the merely earthly and to reestablish the link between heaven and earth. Browning wonders if it is possible to mingle Lairese's aim with his own sense of truth. The act of revision involves the question of seeing things both ways:

How were it could I mingle false with true,  
 Boast, with the sights I see your vision too?  
 Advantage would it prove or detriment  
 If I saw double? (ll. 116-119)

Browning rejects the earlier age's way of seeing double as "feignings," "poeticizings" of reality in order to fill up "a dead ground--nothingness." (l. 135)

A great risk in banishing the supernatural is that the nothingness takes over. One exposes the precariousness and meaninglessness of earth--a sense which Browning reiterates in each parleying. Apparently solid ground constantly threatens to evaporate; with double vision, nothing is absolutely solid. Nonetheless, the poet clasps his rock of self-knowledge and asserts the artistic possibility of seeing double without seeing hallucinations. Browning does not doubt the need to see double; he cannot remain content with the mere earthly. Rather than externalize the invisible, he wishes to show the internal in the external so that by knowing the outside, one has a simultaneous vision of what dwells within:

sense, my De Lairese  
 Cannot content itself with outward things,  
 Mere beauty: soul must needs know whence there springs--  
 How, when and why--what sense but loves, nor lists  
 To know at all. (ll. 139-43)

In Browning's revision of the painter's double vision, the problem becomes how to paint soul without eighteenth-century embellishment, a debate which he treated in "Fra Lippo Lippi" where the painter and his Prior argue. The Prior assumes that one cannot paint

soul if one accurately and realistically paints flesh. Like Browning, Fra Lippo Lippi is caught up in his zest for intensely seen reality. Lippi confesses, "I always see the garden and God there/A-making man's wife." (11.266-67) His ordinary vision of creation teaches the lesson of the inextricability of flesh and soul. In his conviction that there is progress in art, Browning finds that the palpable unreality of mythological painting must be replaced by impalpable reality:

Oh, we can fancy too! but somehow fact  
Has got to--say, not so much push aside  
Fancy, as to declare its place supplied  
By fact unseen but no less fact the same.  
(11.149-52)

Mrs. Orr, whose remarks in her Handbook are nearly always interesting, interprets this passage to mean that Browning's correction of Lairese involves replacing the earlier mythological method of depicting reality with an allegorical mode:

The poet does not go back. He is still as of  
yore a seer; he has only changed in this, that  
his chosen visions are of the soul; their ob-  
jects are no longer visible realities but the  
realities which are unseen.<sup>47</sup>

Browning proposes to take Lairese on a walk, imitating the painter's momentous Walk in his treatise. The walk, following the course of one sun, will constitute a visionary contest:

if I to-day as you of yore  
See just like you the blind--then sight shall cry  
--The whole long day quite gone through--victory!  
(11.178-80)

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<sup>47</sup>Orr, p. 356.

As Browning walks from sunrise to nightfall--a nice reminder of the Apollonian motif--he tries to infuse traditional iconographic situations with new meanings. He attempts a procedure that Erwin Panofsky has labeled pseudomorphosis in regard to Renaissance restorations of classical myth. Panofsky explains the procedure as being more than a reinterpretation:

While classical images were thus deliberately reinterpreted, there are many other cases in which the revived classical traditions merged quite naturally, or even automatically, with surviving medieval traditions. When a classical character had emerged from the Middle Ages in utterly nonclassical disguise . . . and had been restored to its original appearance by the Renaissance, the final result often showed traces of this process. Some of the medieval garments or attributes would cling to the remodelled form, and thereby carry over a medieval element into the content of the new image.

This resulted in what I would like to call a 'pseudomorphosis:' certain Renaissance figures became invested with a meaning which, for all their classicizing appearance, had not been present in their classical prototypes though it had been foreshadowed in classical literature.<sup>48</sup>

Browning's walk deliberately reinterprets Lairese's vision by adding to the allegories a psychological dimension. His landscapes, rarely a focus in his own work, are filled with Ruskin's pathetic fallacy: the morning laughs, the tempest is baffled, the landscape

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<sup>48</sup>Erwin Panofsky, Studies in Iconology (New York, 1962) rpt. London, 1939, pp. 70-71.

utters the feelings it reflects. Instead of using Lairese's allegorical method of placing the figures in the landscape and allowing them to express attitudes and feelings, he asks how the figures feel doing what they inevitably do. In section X, he takes one of Lairese's mythical creatures and re-presents him according to his own psychological style. How does it feel to be Artemis slaying the chamois? (IX)  
 What is it like to be a satyr?

Wonderings of this sort impel Browning to look beneath the hairy, repellent exterior of the Satyr to find the psychological motivation and the human feelings--the facts unseen. The emblems of the satyr and Lyda thus reveals unexpected depths and cannot be expressed in the epigrammatic style of earlier emblems. Rather than using a satyr, Browning might have found a human counterpart. In this regard, "Caliban Upon Setebos" is an exception. Browning usually portrays the Caliban within ordinary men.

In this later poem he employs the rhetorical device of calling attention to the figure and then of addressing it. Next, after describing its appearance, he analyzes what the unpleasant exterior fails to reveal:

What have I seen! O Satyr, well I know  
 How sad thy case and what a world of woe  
 Was hid by the brown visage furry-framed  
 Only for mirth . . .  
 And all the while a heart was panting sick  
 Behind that shaggy bulwark of thy breast--  
 Passion it was that made those breath-bursts thick  
 I took for mirth subsiding into rest.

(11. 283-86;290-93)

Browning demonstrates that he can consciously imitate the eighteenth century allegorical mode of Lairese, but he is correct in asserting that his own method had added something new. In such monologues as "My Last Duchess," he demonstrates how, by a pseudomorphosis, he has transformed Lairese's allegorical method to a modern style. He has placed the figures in attitudes, as Lairese counsels. The embellishments of the portrait, such as the portrait of the Duchess and the statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, the details of his description of his Duchess could be turned into a description by Ripa or Lairese. Browning adds the dimensions to the portrait--the soul by which he claims priority over the past. Nevertheless, shining through the garments of Ferrara is a wraith-like figure, the ghost Browning seeks to banish in "With Gerard de Lairese" but which nonetheless refuses entirely to disappear:

"Tis a ghost.  
So drops away the beauty! There he stands  
Voiceless, scarce strives with deprecating hands.  
(11. 360-62)

Combining word and gesture, Browning imitates the Duke of Ferrara pointing to his past wife "there she stands." Browning's ghost also represents past literary styles. Although he overstates his case against Lairese and his own contemporary, Arnold.<sup>49</sup> (11. 381-89) he successfully made a new style for himself and for the poets who

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<sup>49</sup>DeVane, p. 235.

followed him. His particular 'pseudomorphosis' involves a modern way of seeing double.

### C Major Marching: A Musical Emblem

The tempo changes from a Walk to a March as Browning assembles a final ghostly but heroic troop who march to the Grand March of Charles Avison. Like the resurrected Baronets of Ruddigore, they march across the stage as Browning, in his guise as ancient artificer, "plays the enliver" (l. 293) and brings together the past and the present in a tribute to the power of art, particularly of music, and to his own life as it contributes to that power. This final parleying, which begins and ends with marching, seeks to resolve a question about the limits and powers of art and how to harness the power to make it work. Browning's praise of music mingles its triumph with its failure as he seeks an answer, not so much to the meaning of Avison's March as to the motive for marching itself. One marches, finally, as a defiant, heroic gesture. When the March reappears at the end, unchanged in sound but with Browning's words added, it returns as an emblem for the artistic quest of the Parleyings; it blends word and music, old and new, Browning with his own past and with the past of other artists.

More overtly, perhaps, than any other of the Parleyings, "With Charles Avison" combines personal past of the poet with artistic

past, partly as an indication of Browning's belief in the evocative power of music to reach deeper and further into one's feelings, or "soul." The movement back and forth from past to present of the whole parleying is suggested in the opening which moves from a meditation upon a "strange" (l. 1) play between an event in the present, March 188- to a distant memory. Past and present begin to merge as does vision and reality as a mimetic indication of all the pasts which bear upon the present as a theme of the parleying turns into a meditation upon progress--a concept which connects past to present.

The parleying begins with a common yet extraordinary event in the present time of the poem. It is a bitter March morning, and the view from the poet's window is "cruel" and "forlorn." Suddenly, he catches sight of "life and beauty," a bird, a black-cap, tugging at a shred of cloth which is a fluttering remnant of the previous summer's flower display. Like the nightingale in Keats's ode, the forlorn scene and the bird bring Browning back to himself and remind him of time and mortality. Like the nightingale, too, this bird as muse causes the poet's memory, the "far-flyer" to "clap pinion" and fly backward, not to ancient days, but to his early childhood where it alights on a scrap of memory:

"March" announced,  
 I verily believe, the dead and gone  
 Name of a music-maker: one of such  
 In England as did little or did much,  
 But, doing, had their day once. Avison! (ll. 45-49)

An echo of the title of the work reminds the reader of the theme of the passing of fame and prepares for the expansion of that theme until it fills the parleying. Expansion is one of the methods of this last poem. Words expand, like the word "march" until it takes in the meaning of the time of year and the tempo of music. Sound itself expands until it fills the void of doubt if not with complete articulation at least with recognition; arcs and not perfect rounds, as "Abt Vogler" observes.

So, too, the fragment of music grows and expands until it calls forth a vision. Browning first mentions his small foot stepping to the beat of the bold March. (l. 51) Out of the memory of his foot tapping and the sound of the music, the marchers appear:

So much could one--well, thinnish air effect.  
Am I ungrateful? for, your March, styled "Grand,"  
Did veritably seem to grow, expand,  
And greaten up to title as, unchecked,  
Dream-marchers marched, kept marching, slow and sure,  
In time, to tune, unchangeably the same,  
From nowhere into nowhere, --out they came  
Onward they passed and in they went. (ll. 58-65)

The dream-marchers file out of this passage to become the troop who can bridge the distance between past and present and can lead the way to future, even if all it brings is certain death, as it does for Thamuris or Childe Roland, whose songs heroically mingle success and doom. The marchers, moreover, are one more evocation of Browning's image of the troop of shadows, and the March organizes that troop into the ordering of artistic progression. In spite of the concept of progress,

however, Browning feels the polarities of art's movement as "no-where." Art marches between the poles of "quietude's immutability" (l. 71) and the "innominate," (l. 143) but music can fill the space between those two poles more fully than can painting or poetry.

The blending in memory of Browning's own past with past musicians creates an identification with those musicians. Browning remembers himself in his childhood first as a marcher to Avison's music then as a performer. He is first impressed with the power of the music even though the piece is written in the simplest of keys with the most basic of modulations. Then, in an echo of Coleridge in "Kubla Kahn," he wishes to appropriate the power of music for his poetry:

And yet--and yet--if I could put in rhyme  
The manner of that marching! (ll. 89-90)

Like the speaker in Coleridge's poem, he hears the music and sees the vision which the music invokes and wishes to be able to recreate it. The simplicity of Avison's music, rather than filling him with a sense of the great advancement of nineteenth-century music, makes him feel that he must return to the earlier music to find out something he missed. The tenuousness and limitations of language remind the poet in him of his own "weak self" and his difficult task, so that he must drop out from the ranks of marchers forward and return to relearn the secret in Avison's march:

Back must I foot it, I and my compeers,  
 Only to reach, across a hundred years,  
 The bandsman Avison (11. 94-96)

Once more he returns to Avison, again with his "foot" now grown larger, expanded. As he hears Avison's march, it still has great power to revive a vision, to make past alive to the present:

And here's your music all alive once more--  
 As once it was alive, at least: just so  
 The figured worthies of a waxwork-show  
 Attest--such people, years and years ago,  
 Looked thus when outside death had life below  
 (11. 113-117)

As in "A Toccata of Galuppi's" the music can revive the past. Browning first invokes the image of a diorama, then gives the figures voice.

The question of progress, insisted upon in other parleyings, here receives a more complicated and ambiguous treatment. What had fully expressed the needs of an age represents a kind of perfection. Time brings changes and needs new expressions, but what in art was once achieved cannot be surpassed. For much of the parleying, Browning travels back and forth in time trying to resolve the conflict between time and change on the one hand and the apparent completeness of art on the other:

How can completion grow still more complete?  
 Hear Avison! He tenders evidence  
 That music in his day as much absorbed  
 Heart and soul then as Wagner's music now.  
 Perfect from center to circumference--  
 Orbed to the full can be but fully orbed:  
 And yet--and yet-- (11. 126-32)

The geometric image, suggestive of the sphere and its relationship to the vast tradition of musica theorica, the music of the spheres, correspondence, and the Renaissance musical theory suggests a whole range of musical experience, from practical to philosophical.<sup>50</sup> Browning places himself in this tradition with differences that he understands. He stations himself in time, looks backward, and, in seeing how the times have advanced, he also feels how the times have lost something. He cannot in good faith establish a confident relationship between perfect harmony and perfection in art. His worry, which he expressed in the image of the troops of shadows, also expresses itself in this poem as doubt about words themselves, perhaps doubt in all expression. He not only wonders whether the troop he has joined will triumph, he wonders about the endeavor of art itself.

The question, "How can perfection grow still more complete?" with its rich use of the word "still," enters upon the realm of time, movement, and the ever-changing quality of art. Like Shelley and like Eliot, Browning perceives aesthetic questions as involving a primary consciousness of the difficulty of stilling the movement of words. How to still the movement and yet be still moving becomes associated with his own personal past and the romantic past as a whole. The flight of the bird reminds Browning of the flight of the

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<sup>50</sup>John Hollander, The Untuning of the Sky (Princeton, 1961) gives a review of this subject, Chapter II, pp. 20-51.

soul, the glimpses of eternity that the artist tries to capture, and the tempo of change. Haunted by temporality and the ultimate impossibility of either stilling the movement of words or of getting beyond mind to the transcendent substratum of ever-moving soul or feeling, Browning finds that music can come closest of the arts to achieving the vision. Again he expands the possible meanings of the word "still" and cannot find enough images to fit the meaning he seeks:

There is no truer truth obtainable  
By Man than comes of music. "Soul"--(accept  
A word which vaguely names what no adept  
In word-use fits and fixes so that still  
Thing shall not slip word's fetter and remain  
Innominate as first . . . (11.138-43)

Constantly lurking in the poet's awareness is the danger of words slipping and falling into the unnamed void. In addition to Browning's terrible awareness of the instability of words and the consequent insecurity of all poetic endeavor, he believes that the most valuable things to put into words are the least tractable. "Mind" as opposed to "soul" can build up solid knowledge and can express it, but such expression is like a floor over the unsounded sea. By distinguishing "change" from creation, the one moving, the other stilled, Browning states the aim of art:

Now, could we shoot  
Liquidity into a mold, --some way  
Arrest Soul's evanescent moods, and keep  
Unalterably still the forms that leap  
To life by help of Art! (11.209-13)

Browning then engages upon a comparison of the arts and finds that music penetrates most deeply into the sea of soul. He invokes music's power, begs and pleads with it to rescue art from temporality but finds to his sorrow that the essence of passions eludes even the tempo of music. What he seeks remains unnamed, and he helplessly calls it "the abysmal bottom-growth, ambiguous thing," wherein lies the essence of life:

There it lies,  
Marvel and mystery, of mysteries  
And marvels, most to love and laud thee for!  
Save it from chance and change we most abhor!  
Give momentary feeling permanence  
(ll. 239-43)

Browning's comparisons of the arts enriches the aesthetic debate of the entire Parleyings and links him to an earlier tradition. Both Lairese and Avison, in eighteenth-century fashion compare the attributes of the arts.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, in regard to his emblematic method, Browning once again demonstrates his skill as a magician, an ancient artificer who completes an emblem with his words.

In this case, the impresa is a piece of music, Charles Avison's Grand March. Browning makes much of his ordinary C Major key, recalling Abt Vogler's return to the key of "this life" and,

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<sup>51</sup> See Jean H. Hagstrum, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Grey for a discussion of the tendency to unite painting and poetry and Charles Avison, Essay on Musical Expression (London, 1753) for an example of the practice of comparing the arts.

by extension, reminding the reader of his insistence upon taking the ordinary events of life for the matter of art. Before he uncovers the full force of the emblem, he turns, in section IX, to a bit of musical necromancy.

In an extended metaphor which compares music to a sort of chemical magic, Browning takes the elements of music and rekindles deadened past notes. The image recalls the flames of other parleyings, beginning with the Prologue and combines it with the figure of the wizard. After Browning raids the elements of music from the laboratory of his music master, John Relfe, he is ready to modernize the ancient music:

armed wherewith I go  
To play the enliver. Bring good antique stuff!  
Was it alight once? Still lives spark enough  
For breath to quicken, run the smouldering ash  
Red right-through . . . .

See there and there!  
I sprinkle my reactives, pitch broadcast  
Discords and resolutions, turn aghast  
Melody's easy going, jostle law  
With license, modulate (no Bach in awe),  
Change enharmonically (Hudl to thank),  
And lo, upstart the flamelets, --what was blank  
Turns scarlet, purple, crimson!

(11.292-96;300-307)

Unlike Browning's other modernizations, however, this act of wizardry does not succeed. He acknowledges his own failure, first by reassuring Avison that he will not attempt innovation with his March (X) and then by admitting that all his "talk" has been "tiresome." (1.323) Vascillation and uncertainty are reflected in the arguments

back and forth as the parleying appears to become overwhelmed by Browning's sense of the negation of all art by unstill time. All efforts appear futile to hold back time, and temporality itself appears to be the 'nowhere,' the void to which all marchers step:

Ah but such and such  
Beliefs of yore seemed unexpugnable  
When we attained them! E'en as they, so will  
This their successor have the due morn, noon,  
Evening and night--just as an old-world tune  
Wears out and drops away. (ll. 349-54)

Marching forward gave Browning a sense of futility as marching backward gave him a sense of inadequacy. He has still not found the "march-motive," the reason anyone marches in the first place. He has tried too hard, it seems, for he finds at least a partial answer by listening to the music unchanged and by accepting the "bold C Major" of Avison's original. He discovers that he was concentrating upon style which is merely a time-capsule sheathing the truth which lives within even as each style wears out, withers, and drops off. In an echo of his other injunctions as emblematiser to alert the senses, he commands sound to commence as a heroic gesture of defiance. "Blare it forth." (l. 361):

bang the drums,  
Blow the trumps, Avison! March-motive? that's  
Truth which endures resetting. (ll. 381-83)

The heroic commands, however, have a hollow ring. They fail to produce the necessary triumph. Once again, Browning cannot march triumphantly towards the Future. (l. 388) Once again, he retreats:

Or suppose  
 Back and not forward, transformation goes?  
 Once more some sable-stoled procession---  
 (ll. 389-91)

This black procession leads to a gallows tree to the drone of Elizabethan plain-song, but the specter of death hovers as a reminder of the dangling man from the Prologue, the dark macabre element of the Parleyings. Browning reviews three hundred years of English music history, and when he reaches Avison again all he can do is assert the heroic truth of the music. Like Childe Roland, he raises his song, voice, "fife, trumpet, drum and singers" (l. 422) to Avison's tune which "endures resetting." In the manner of an emblemist, he completes the emblem with his own words, but instead of a visual image, he completes a piece of music. The ambiguity of the ending, a musical transcription of Avison's March signals a curious acknowledgment of the failure of the poem to achieve its goal. Although Browning's ending may have been intended to be triumphant as the words suggest, the notes remain on the page at the end without words. Browning's words evoke a past and end the parleying on a C Major Chord, --Abt Vogler's C Major of this life--but ambiguously fail to resolve the issues of the poem, as if Browning were demonstrating his philosophy of the imperfect. The finale of the parleying, the bare notes of the original March, exemplify the "deconstruction," in Paul de Man's term of the creative effort of the parleying. All humanity can do, as Yeats was later to agree, is to sing loudly in the face of decay.

Printing Press and Lyre, Christ and Apollo: "Fust and his Friends"

In a burlesque counterpart to the Prologue, the Epilogue continues and reverses the dualism of "Apollo and the Fates." The dualism between good and evil continues along with ritualistic ceremonies. Browning includes elements from the previous parleyings, so that the cumulative impression is of a compressed summary of the work as a whole. The miraculous device of the Epilogue, rather than the wine of imagination, is the printing press which, like wine, can aid the imagination. Whether the printing press will be used for good or evil, however, depends upon the right man to use it. The final line of "Fust and his Friends" prophesies the coming of such a man.

The opening movement of the Epilogue is upward, a contrast to the downward plunge of Apollo in the Prologue:

Up, up, up--next step of the staircase  
Lands us, lo, at the chamber of dread!  
(11.1-2)

The "chamber of dread" echoes the "dread hollow" of the Prologue where the dark Fates dwell. Seven clerical friends (the number of the Parleyings) climb to Fust's apartments where strange infernal events are rumored to take place. Fust, like Faust, has reputedly sold his soul to the Devil, and the timorous friends have come to save him, as Apollo has come to save Admetus from the dark Fates. Actually, Fust has already repented his sins which involved excess but nothing so excessive as selling his soul. What appears infernal and dark is not

necessarily so, and Browning returns to his worry about how to distinguish good from evil in a world where perceptions cannot be trusted. What appears evil may not be, and even men of the church cannot tell.

In a parody of an exorcism, which reflects the ritual wine dance of the Prologue and the other ritual marvels of the seven parleyings, the divines prepare to exorcise the devil from Fust, except they cannot remember the prayer. Fust produces printed copies and then, to the wonderment of the clerics, unveils the marvel of the printing press, explaining to his friends the secret of its invention. As he reveals the press, Fust's images are similar to Tennyson's descriptions of the miraculous raising of Camelot, a city built to music, and to the descriptions of Abt Vogler's improvisations:

[The doors open, and the Press  
is discovered in operation]

Brave full-bodied birth of this brain that conceived thee  
In splendour and music, --sustained the slow drag  
Of the days stretched to years dim with doubt, --yet  
believed thee,  
Had faith in thy first leap of life! Pulse might flag--  
--Mine fluttered how faintly! --Arch-moment might lag

Its longest--I bided, made light of endurance,  
Held hard by the hope of an advent which--dreamed,  
Is done now: night yields to the dawn's reassurance:  
I have thee--I hold thee--my fancy that seemed,  
My fact that proves palpable! (ll. 261-270)

The delineation of the process of invention could apply to any kind of creative invention. Browning's insistence upon facts from fancies and fancies from fact in his works connects what he says about the invention of the printing press to the invention of his poems. In a

similar fashion to Fust's printing press, Browning's poems insist upon being palpable, in the sense that they make available the real thing, the fact made out of fancy.

Moreover, his worry about the use of his poems, of their being misunderstood and misused, create a sympathetic link between himself and Fust. The seven find Fust despondent and misinterpret his mood as penitance for his pact with infernal forces. Actually, Fust is worried that his invention which sends the Word out, unites body with soul, (1.290) has potential to banish darkness with "sun-flash and sphere-song" (1.293) will be distorted, soiled, fallen. He likens his creation to God's and, like the Almighty, sends his words, his "Types" (1.437) out into the world.

In other sections of the Parleyings, Browning refers to his figures as "types." An artistic truth is a pure "type untampered with, the naked star!" in "With Francis Furini." (1.247) The printing press is another artifice which explains his emblematic thought. His poems, representing men and women, dramatic personae, also signify "types" which Browning sends out into the world to deliver a gospel, news of truth:

My Press strains a-tremble: whose masterful eye  
Will be first in new regions new truth to descry?

Give chase, soul! Be sure each new capture consigned  
To my Types will go forth like God's bread  
--Miraculous food not for body but mind,  
Truth's manna! (11.434-439)

In the Epilogue Browning concentrates an astonishing array of his characteristic images, "fly and worm, ore and plant," (l. 401) orb, food, wine, star, in a prophetic, nearly apocalyptic catalogue.

Although the tone of "Fust and his Friends" is generally triumphant, Browning is aware of the potential dangers in every invention. By multiplying the possibility of good, one seemingly cannot avoid increasing the chances for evil. All one can hope for is a figure who will, like Prometheus, come to save mankind from its base instincts. The end of the Epilogue prophesies the coming of a great man such as Prometheus. Mrs. Orr and DeVane following her, agree that the man is Luther, who used the printing press to make the Bible available to all men.<sup>52</sup> As the source of the Reformation, Luther would be an appropriate figure for Browning with his strong Protestant Dissenting background to use at the end of his autobiography. In this regard, it is also tempting to see glimmerings of Browning, the dissenter shining through the robes of that early reformer. Particularly because of the autobiographical cast of the Parleyings, it would be hard not to find some personal reference in the final line of the poem, "I foresee such a man." In the Prologue, Browning's composite self-figure is Browning/Shelley as Apollo, a youthfully optimistic upholder of the imagination at the cost of other realities. At the conclusion, Browning presents a more mature

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<sup>52</sup>See Orr, p. 361 and DeVane, p. 298.

composite figure. Browning, partly as Faust the inventor, partly as the shadowy figure at the end who "shall quench the fire" of heresy, will send forth the truth, the word of God, will uncover the emblematic reality of nature. Christ in the form of Luther/Browning, the reformer, has been reconciled with Apollo/Browning.

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