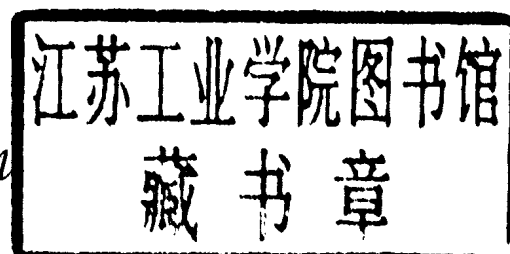# POETRY

CRITICISM

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 61

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editor

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GALE

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Thomson Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature,* (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism,* vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

v

The Ring and the Book

Robert Browning

The following entry presents criticism of Browning's poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69). For discussion of Browning's complete career, see *PC,* Volume 2.

INTRODUCTION

The Ring and the Book is regarded as Browning's poetic masterwork. Based on a set of historical and legal documents that the poet discovered in a bookstall in the square of San Lorenzo in Florence in 1860, the poem presents a series of dramatic monologues offering various perspectives on a lurid murder trial that involved a child bride, a predatory older groom, a disguised priest, a triple murder, four hangings, and a beheading. Critics contend that Browning's adaptation of these legal briefs, letters, and pamphlets into a complex, compelling, and well-crafted poem illustrates the poet's wide-ranging knowledge on an impressive range of subjects and constitutes one of the finest achievements in English poetry.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Comprised of more than 21,000 lines arranged in twelve sections, or books, and published in four volumes, *The Ring and the Book* is based on a collection of documents Browning dubbed the "Old Yellow Book," which he bought for a pittance at a bookstall in Florence in 1860. Biographers assert that Browning started composing *The Ring and the Book* in 1864 and completed it at the end of 1868. In the first section of the poem, a speaker addresses the reader and describes how he discovered a book revealing the details of a seventeenth-century Italian murder trial in a Florence bookstall. He announces his intention to retell the story, and portrays himself as a master craftsman who will fashion a poem out of the raw documents, as a goldsmith shapes a beautiful ring out of raw gold. He maintains that although his rendition will be based on facts, the reader should not concentrate on the issue of the murderer's guilt, but should instead focus on why perception differs from person to person. The speaker then outlines the facts of the case, which are punctuated by ten extended monologues from the perspectives of the main players.
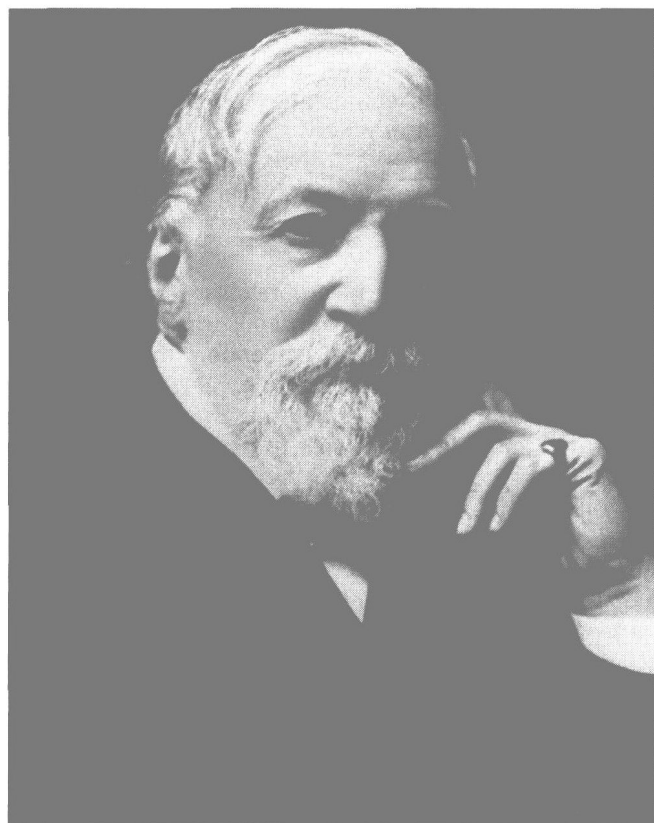
In 1693 Guido Franceschini, a poor nobleman of inferior rank, marries a thirteen-year-old girl named Pompilia Comparini from a wealthy family. Three years later, when Pompilia's mother and father, Violante and Pietro Comparini, visit Guido's estate in Arezzo, they are shocked to find their daughter living in impoverished and abusive conditions. They charge Guido with misrepresenting his financial situation at the time of the marriage and demand the return of their daughter's dowry. When it is revealed that Pompilia is the Comparinis' foster-child, bought from her mother, a prostitute, Guido intensifies his mistreatment of Pompilia. She finally flees the abuse and escapes to Rome with the help of a young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi. Guido pursues her and captures the couple about fifteen miles from Rome. Caponsacchi is excommunicated after being charged with seduction and adultery; Pompilia is sent to a nunnery. When it becomes apparent that Pompilia is pregnant, she is sent

to live with her parents in Rome and months later gives birth to a baby boy, who is named Gaetano. Guido, realizing that he must have the child in order to gain his inheritance, travels to the Comparini estate in Rome. With four accomplices, he murders Pompilia's parents and stabs his wife 22 times; she survives long enough to identify her murderer. The baby is left unharmed. All five attackers are caught, arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death on February 22, 1698. Because he was a nobleman, Guido is beheaded; his accomplices are hanged in front of a large crowd. The final section of the poem reintroduces the speaker from the opening, who concludes with commentary on the nature of art and the role of truth in poetry.

MAJOR THEMES

The Ring and the Book incorporates several of Browning's most important thematic concerns: the nature of truth, the validity of human perception, the role of the reader in poetic expression, and the value of poetry as a reflection of universal concerns. By employing the extended monologue form—the poem includes ten dramatic monologues that express the perspectives of the speaker and the principals in the affair, as well as the Pope and the lawyers in the trial—Browning is able to present a range of perceptions as well as reveal the contradictory natures of individual characters. *The Ring and the Book* also explores several legal and moral questions current in seventeenth-century society, such as the status of women as property, domestic violence, the legal rules of marriage and inheritance, the responsibility of clergy, and the importance of honor in civil society. Commentators have found connections between the poem and Browning's personal experience, noting particularly the parallels between the relationship of Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and that of Caponsacchi and Pompilia. Moreover, they commend the range of metaphors and classical and biblical allusions found in *The Ring and the Book*. The ring metaphor is often viewed as the unifying metaphor at the heart of the poem and has been subject of a number of interpretations from a variety of perspectives.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Regarded as Browning's major contribution to English literature, *The Ring and the Book* has also been deemed the pinnacle of his poetic career. Reviewers recognized the value of the work upon its publication, and the poem enjoyed immediate success. Throughout the years, literary scholars have focused on Browning's skillful use of dramatic monologue, which functions to provide a multi-layered portrayal of the trial and its implications.

However, as John M. Menaghan has pointed out, the disparate perspectives presented in *The Ring and the Book* have led to critical disputes over the poem's meaning and the author's intent. Scholars have investigated discrepancies between the "Old Yellow Book," and Browning's imaginative adaptation, and while some have objected to the poet's apparent departures from the "truth," others have contended that Browning is deliberately questioning the possibility of objective truth. W. Warwick Slinn has argued that there is "no separate divine truth in the poem, no dramatized position that corresponds to the position of, for example, Milton's God in *Paradise Lost*." He has maintained that "Browning's structure for the poem stresses a continual movement into future texts, an unceasing transition from image to image, statement to statement, a movement which both produces meaning and postpones truth," while Anne Hiemstra has stressed that "biblical symbolism functions as the element that controls the ultimate meaning" of the episodes depicted in the poem. Paul Zietlow has contended that in the poem Browning posits a world devoid of empirical and moral truth, and challenges the reader to "bear witness to ineffable spiritual truths by experiencing internal rebirth and resurrection."

Other critics have examined a variety of aspects of the poem. Susan C. Hines and Mary Ellis Gibson have both observed in *The Ring and the Book* the Victorian fascination with crime and criminal trials. Slinn, Simon Petch, and L. M. Findlay have each explored different ways language functions in the poem. A number of critics have focused on psychology and characterization in *The Ring and the Book*. Alexander Pettit has detected elements of parody in Browning's depiction of Caponsacchi and Guido, which significantly affects the reception and interpretation of the characters. Candace Ward has seen Pompilia as representing a conflict of views on the nature of women. Melissa Valiska Gregory has explored domestic and sexual dynamics in the poem, arguing that "Browning's dramatic monologues shed new light on a domestic problem of considerable importance to the Victorian period: the psychology of sexual violence." Norman Friedman has analyzed Guido's psychology, contending that by the end of the poem "he has moved from one level of being to another and come into contact with a part of himself that he has hitherto repressed."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession 1833
Paracelsus 1835

Sordello 1840

**Dramatic Lyrics* 1842

**Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* 1845

Poems. 2 vols. 1849

Christmas Eve and Easter Day 1850

Two Poems [with Elizabeth Barrett Browning] 1854

Men and Women. 2 vols. 1855

Poetical Works. 3 vols. 1863

Dramatis Personae 1864

The Ring and the Book. 4 vols. 1868-69

Balaustion's Adventure, Including a Transcript from Euripides 1871

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society 1871

Fifine at the Fair 1872

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country; or, Turf and Towers 1873

Aristophanes' Apology, Including a Transcript from Euripides, Being the Last Adventures of Balaustion 1875

The Inn Album 1875

Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper, with Other Poems 1876

La Saisiaz, and The Two Poets of Croisic 1878

Dramatic Idyls. 2 vols. 1879-80

Jocoseria 1883

Ferishtah's Fancies 1884

Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day 1887

Asolando: Fancies and Facts 1889

The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning [edited by Augustine Birrell] 1915

Robert Browning: The Poems. 2 vols. [edited by John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins] 1981

Poetical Works. 8 vols. [Oxford English Texts] 1983-2001

Other Major Works

Strafford (play) 1837

**Pippa Passes* (play) 1841

**King Victor and King Charles* (play) 1842

**A Blot in the 'Scutcheon: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (play) 1843

**The Return of the Druses: A Tragedy in Five Acts* (play) 1843

**Colombe's Birthday: A Play in Five Acts* (play) 1844

**Luria, and A Soul's Tragedy* (play) 1846

The Agamemnon of Aeschylus (play) 1877

The Works of Robert Browning. 10 vols. [edited by Frederic G. Kenyon] (poetry and plays) 1912

The Brownings' Correspondence. 14 vols. [edited by Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson] 1984-98

The Plays of Robert Browning [edited by Thomas J. Collins and Richard J. Shroyer] 1988

*These eight works comprise the *Bells and Pomegranates* series.

CRITICISM

John M. Menaghan (essay date spring 1983)

SOURCE: Menaghan, John M. "Embodied Truth: *The Ring and the Book* Reconsidered." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (spring 1983): 263-76.

[*In the following essay, Menaghan outlines and responds to the various controversies surrounding* The Ring and the Book *and elucidates Browning's goals for the poem.*]

Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it.

W. B. Yeats

I

Anyone reviewing the critical literature surrounding Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* is likely to be led at some point to ask why, given what critics assume to be Browning's goals for the poem, he seems to have taken such a peculiar, clotted, and roundabout path to their realization. If the poem is designed to convince us, say, of Pompilia's innocence, why has the poet built in so many elements that distract us not just from a conviction of such innocence but even from any steady concern with seeing it established? Why, if the poem's climax comes with the Pope's monologue, do the two books which follow do so much to complicate our sense of having arrived at the truth? When questions like these are raised at all, they are usually raised by critics who believe the answers must necessarily reflect negatively on Browning, that their needing to be raised at all calls into question not the critics' assumptions about what the poet was trying to do but the success of the work itself.

Loosely following the lead of Ralph Rader in another context,[1] I would seek to ask instead the following general question as a means of resolving the many minor disputes that have dogged the work since its publication in four volumes in 1868-9: what must Browning have been trying to do, what larger intention for the construction of the whole must have determined the choices of developing each part in order that the poet, so familiar with the pain of being misunderstood, should have chosen to present the poem as he did, despite the risks of confusion such a complex presentation involved? A satisfactory answer to this question would, I believe, go far towards correcting any false assumptions that have been made about the poem in the past, and help us to see particular effects and sections of the massive work in light of the author's overarching design, his controlling intention.

Such a process must begin with a brief rehearsal of the most common and general critical controversies surrounding the work, followed by an attempt to resolve

such controversies from the broad perspective of a posited controlling intention. Several major issues run through the criticism of the century and more since the work's appearance. The first centres upon the famous 'Yellow Book,' discovered by Browning in 1860 in the Piazza San Lorenzo in Florence. Despite the many imaginative embellishments evident in the poem, Browning insisted that he had adhered to 'the facts' in presenting the tale of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, Guido, the Pope, and the others in a series of alternately sordid and noble adventures. The obvious discrepancies between the limited and fairly unromanticized picture of both character and event which emerges from a reading of the 'Yellow Book' and Browning's imaginative, symbolic treatment of them have not been so obvious as to preclude their being pointed out, 'substantiated,' and used as a bludgeon by those critics disinclined to believe that Browning must have been aware of such discrepancies and have meant by the 'facts' something more primary and less open to interpretation. The hue and cry against the poet's rather liberal reinterpretation of the characters and their motives begins early in the criticism and is given repeated impetus by the introduction of the 'Yellow Book' itself and other documents relating to the case as they appear successively in English translations.[2]

A second controversy centres upon the ring metaphor, the object over the years of nearly every sort of scientific, aesthetic, and philosophical scrutiny and interpretation. The problem of deciding whether the metaphor *works* has been complicated by a series of disagreements over what it *means,* with every new commentator working a variation on Browning's original explanation.

Related to both of these issues has been the question of Browning's intelligence, his intellectual capacity. Did he possess and display a sure grasp of philosophical and theological intricacies? Was he capable of and did he provide a coherent new system of thought? Was he merely a none too penetrating optimist, or, conversely, a hopeless romantic indulging a dark fascination with evil and malevolence? Over the years, and particularly in relation to his master work, Browning has been accused of deficiencies in all of these areas.

Somewhat more crucial to this discussion of *The Ring and the Book* has been the debate over its structure. Critics have been at odds in deciding just what the length, dramatic form, and choice of subject-matter are designed to do. Is the whole apparatus merely meant to convince us of Pompilia's innocence, or, alternately, that there is no such thing as truth? Are we instead to see that only the poet possesses truth, by seeing it from all sides? Does the work end by presenting us with the truth, or only with a sense that truth is not to be had? Alternative answers to all of these questions have been

offered at one time or another by critics, sometimes to establish the poet's success and sometimes his failure.

In addition, there are questions as to the suitability of Browning's subject-matter to his chosen format (Henry James saw the possibilities of a novel in the story, as apparently Browning had also, offering it to Trollope and others before deciding to treat it himself); the question of authorial intrusion versus dramatic presentation in books I and XII (is Browning to be taken as a dramatic character here?); and the obvious parallels in subject-matter and treatment between the poem and Browning's own life experience. These elements as well are sometimes viewed as the keys to the success of the work, sometimes as the evidence of its failure.

Is there a way of viewing the work and the issues raised by it which would account for our continued attention to it in spite of these apparent deficiencies and for our continuing to be moved by it?[3] I think there is, and I think that many of the interpretations and accusations placed on Browning's masterpiece deserve to be re-examined in the light of his discoverable intention.

Suppose we take to heart the end of the poem, Browning's statement that the whole poem is meant to show that

> our human speech is nought
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind.[4]

Anticipating the reader, Browning as speaker proceeds to ask why one would take the foregoing, roundabout way to prove so little or, as Browning ambiguously puts it, 'so much' (XII.841). Browning's answer, which incidentally affirms and insists on this seemingly little thing to be proved as the complex intention of the poem, is that 'the artistic way' is 'the one way possible / Of speaking truth' (XII.843-4). The truth he wishes to *have spoken* cannot be rendered directly by one voice, self-consciously addressing an audience, not even the voice of the poet himself. In light of this fact, Browning induces us to understand that no particular statement or spokesman within the poem, not even the poet's own utterance, can be taken as authoritative. Thus Browning employs the only possible form in which to express truth: Art. The truth, then, rather than being extractable from particular statements within the poem, must be seen to exist only *as* the poem, and only if it succeeds as a whole, as the artistic embodiment of, not merely the vehicle for, a truth that could not otherwise be expressed.

But Browning is not concerned to enforce a theme so much as to have the poem work its effect upon the reader. The poem is not a bare, plain statement of the apparently simplistic notion that man cannot know truth.

Rather, Browning would seek to 'tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought' (XII.859-60). He knows it is ineffective to look 'a brother in the face' and pronounce a thing to be truth, 'Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false' (XII.855). So he would have us experience both the elusiveness of truth and a desire to attain or at least approach a knowledge of it. This experience necessarily involves a thorough acquaintance with the 'bare facts' of an actual human experience, as supported by documents, an attempt by the reader to sort through and at the same time vicariously participate in the insights and distortions of a variety of perceptions and finally to arrive at a sense of the truth as something more and more nearly visible with each additional perspective but never completely to be known. In this light what is often taken as the *raison d'être* of the poem, to establish Pompilia's innocence, is more nearly a device designed to sustain our interest in truth even in the midst of numerous distortions. Browning focuses our concern on a particular situation about which we will care enough to want to see the truth established and which will help to maintain our interest in seeing the existence of truth validated in general terms. From the perspective of this controlling intention—to bring us through an experience of the inaccessibility of, and at the same time fuel our hunger for, the truth—many of the accumulated distortions of criticism begin to drop away.

II

One major source of controversy has been the disputed relation, as noted above, between fact and imagination, between the facts as they appear in the 'Yellow Book' and elsewhere and Browning's apparent transformation of them into the extended human drama of the poem. Critics have not in the main objected to such a transformation, seeing it instead as the poet's right and function.[5] Instead, they have been puzzled by the insistence upon fidelity to fact in view of the obvious extension and embellishment which occur. This puzzlement is reinforced by the almost jovial quality of assurance with which Browning expresses his insistence upon such fidelity: '"Why I almost have you at an unfair advantage," Browning tells Miss Wedgwood, "in the fact that the whole story is *true*."'[6]

Yet Browning's insistence need not be so puzzling if we see the poem as only peripherally concerned with the story of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. Even as regards their story, however, Browning is faithful to the facts in one indisputable sense: he does not alter events in order to reflect a theme. He does not, for instance, have Guido kill Caponsacchi and Pompilia when he discovers them at Castelnuovo, though he might well have had such a murder take place in his story were he concerned primarily to convince us of the wrong done to Pompilia. Browning does not consider such a story because such

a murder did not, *in fact*, take place.[7] He begins, then, with an assumed fidelity to the facts, to actual events, and only allows his imagination to elucidate the life behind the unalterable facts of the case. 'Fancy with fact is just one fact the more' (I.464). He is free to stick to the facts because the story itself is no more than a vehicle for the larger purposes of the poet. He is concerned not to alter events as a means of controlling our judgment but to direct our attention to the impossibility of certain judgment about such events. At the same time he must establish the importance of seeking the truth, which lies somewhere behind the distortions of interpretation.

Further, to accept Browning as a dramatic speaker in books I and XII, as we finally must do if we are to see the poem as a consistent whole, is to see this embellishment as a function of his self-acknowledged inability to present us with a view of events free from distortion. It is odd how few critics have even considered the possibility that Browning is a character in his own poem,[8] yet he must be if the dramatic form is not to be violated and if the general message regarding human speech is not to be undercut. As readers schooled to accept the voice of the poet as authoritative, Browning's Victorian audience had to be taught that such a voice must be judged along with those of all the other characters in order for the poem to achieve its proper effect.

Nor have the critics made much, except to complain, of the fact that Browning for the first time in his poetic career builds the details of his own life experience into the poem to foster his status as a speaker with a full-fledged background and a set of artistic obsessions reminiscent of '**Fra Lippo Lippi**' or '**Andrea del Sarto.**' Those who claim that the latter is Browning's fullest version of himself have failed to recognize that the fullest version of Browning as artist and personality is given with a fair amount of explicitness in his greatest work, and that Browning, rather than concealing his personality behind an assumed mask, has chosen instead to dramatize himself in his 'role' as speaker.

Thus we can see that any question of historical accuracy becomes also a question of Browning's personal experience and its effect on the interpretation offered by his speaker/self. The complex relation between aspects of the poet's life and his transformation of the characters in the poem and their symbolic trappings is obliquely acknowledged by Browning. He manipulates the recognized limits of his own poetic and visionary powers to contribute to his main purpose. The poet as speaker distorts our view of the other speakers, revealing himself thereby as a less than independent observer even while he provides us with a seemingly objective opportunity to be exposed to the viewpoints of the various important principals.

As the biographers make clear, Browning was immersed in troubling private concerns all during the period of the poem's composition.[9] Yet, rather than seeing the inevitable traces of the poet's personality as intrusions upon the dramatic presentation of a distinct historical event,[10] we may well appreciate how Browning, by choosing for the first time in his career to express himself directly in his work (a work which, ironically enough, argues against the inefficacy of directness in myriad ways), hit on the brilliant device of turning himself into a dramatic and self-dramatizing voice. By this method he could appear to promote his own judgments on the one hand, warn us away from the wholesale adoption of them on the other, and cause us ultimately to be aware of and to question the influence of our own personal concerns on our ongoing interpretation of character and event.[11]

Finding Browning established as speaker/character, we begin to see that much of the embellishment of the facts (rather than of the characters themselves, whom Browning has 'resuscitated') may be said to emanate from the private motives of the speakers and from the larger demands of the dramatic framework. In this view, the poet/speaker is the medium through which the *other* characters speak, the distorting glass through which we are forced to perceive them, and yet the resuscitation itself is performed by the invisible poet.

How is the poet invisible and yet so wholly in evidence? This was the problem facing Browning himself, and his ring metaphor is an attempt to explain how the poet can be both a voice in the poem and the invisible shaper of the whole:

> I fused my live soul and that inert stuff.
>
> (I.469)

Though the controversy over the metaphor has continued unabated up to the present, with many critics continuing to find the metaphor troublesome, the best statement of its meaning and effect would seem to be the following:

> The process of mixing alloy with pure gold to shape the ring parallels that by which Browning mixed imagination with pure fact for his poem. If a quick spurt of acid at last removed alloy from the ring's face, so the poet's imagination in effect vanished from the surface of the work—to be enveloped and subsumed by the psyches of his historic monologuists, whose speeches owe to it for their artistic design, interrelations, and ultimate meaning.[12]

To this it need only be added that, as Paul Cundiff first points out, the poet is removed only from the surface of the work, becoming invisible after shaping the whole.[13] But within the work, blended with the pure gold of facts, Browning the speaker remains inextricably mixed

in with the other characters and voices, influencing without quite controlling our view of them. Thus we have the shaping poet whose influence vanishes from the surface of the work and the inextricable alloy of the poet/speaker's interpretive prejudices mixed in with the other voices so anxious to persuade.

We may assume that Browning was at the same time not entirely oblivious to the many symbolic associations of the circle as a symbol of perfection, gold as both precious metal and filthy lucre, and the added richness of the connection between Elizabeth's actual ring and the attraction to 'facts' as pure gold. Further, we may see the analogy of the poem itself to a gold ring as pointing to Browning's contention that we are as humans destined never to arrive at a full perception of the truth but only to circle the area in which it resides. The repetition of the same basic events narrated by the ten different speakers (including the poet), a ring of persuasion and interpretation swirling around the same centre of unalterable fact, adds richly to the metaphor. There seems little reason, then, to complain about Browning's ring metaphor as inconsistent, illogical, or overworked. Complaints about the metaphor would seem to derive instead from a failure in large part to see Browning as speaker, and thereby to miss the main significance of the metaphor as a symbol of the split between the invisible poet removed from the work's surface and the poet/speaker as inextricable alloy mixed in with the other elements of the whole.

The same failure to perceive Browning's role as a speaker in the poem, subject to the same evaluative scrutiny as the other speakers, has led to a decidedly distorted view of his intellectual prowess.[14] There is nothing wrong, of course, with questioning the limits and capabilities of Browning's mind. But if we come to see *The Ring and the Book* as a dramatic form in which the poet's voice is *designed* in a certain sense to be unreliable, to be one voice among many competing voices in the work, it must appear absurd to attempt to evaluate Browning the man by examining a dramatic self-portrayal which demands to be undermined if the poem as a whole is to succeed as a dramatic construct. As K. L. Knickerbocker suggests in response to one attack on Browning as a thinker:

> He had no reason, perhaps not even the ability, to develop a *system* of thought. There are plenty of systems and none of them satisfactory . . . He made little effort to be obviously consistent, on the grounds, possibly, that life in any general sense is inescapably inconsistent anyway.[15]

At the very least, we cannot ask Browning to be consistent in a poem which is attempting to demonstrate experientially the impossibility of being so by presenting dramatic characters torn between the search for truth and their own motives for speaking, and a poet/

speaker torn between the desire to disappear from the face of his objective presentation and to appear as a character within it, balancing a restless desire to discover the truth among the tangle of lives and lies against the conviction that a firm knowledge of truth lies outside man's power. Browning as poet, then, is concerned to present not the resolution of intellectual controversies but the development of 'conflicts growing out of opposing intellectual and emotional forces.'[16] He is not concerned to present a speculative system of thought but the drama of the human predicament in a world where truth, however earnestly desired, can only be approximated, never attained.

III

It is usually assumed that a conviction of Pompilia's innocence is that goal towards which the poet intends with all his poetic resources to lead us. Yet the evidence of both the poem itself and of critical reaction to it ought to call such an assumption into question. Not only does the traditional focus upon the monologues of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope to the exclusion of the others seem false and sentimental, as recent critics have noted, but the poem also proceeds in such a manner as to make a firm conviction of any sort increasingly difficult to sustain or even arrive at. This is not to say that we do not in a general way assent to Pompilia's probable innocence. But the poem, were it designed to convince us of her unquestionable innocence, surely might have contained certain elements which are lacking and eliminated certain others so distractingly present. Pompilia's speech is no doubt very moving, but it is surrounded and qualified by other monologues and perspectives which cannot but discourage us from an easy acceptance of Pompilia as relayer of spiritual and temporal truth. As one critic puts it: 'The ground of Browning's monologues remains a character seen under moments of intense stress, driven to take a point of view.'[17] Pompilia is just such a character, as are Caponsacchi, the Pope, and all the others, the poet/speaker not the least.

Yet such intense stress is not the burden of the reader of *The Ring and the Book.* His natural concern for the narrative flow is rather tidily dismissed in book I by the poet/speaker, who tells the tale three times over, and interprets liberally for the reader, providing the momentary impression that, the narrative shot, there is nothing left to hear. What is left, however, is the opportunity to abandon for a time the reader's own need, experienced as a rule under 'moments of intense stress' in the unfolding of a traditional narrative, to adopt a point of view.

Instead, the reader is invited to relocate his attention, to listen to the various points of view, to know they have been adopted under stress, and from a position of semi-detached judgment to evaluate not Pompilia's innocence but the motives of human speech and the possibilities for discovering truth within it. The evaluation will by no means be an easy one. Only by evaluating motives and being exposed to the several characters engaged in speech and struggle can the reader begin to understand that this poem is not, like traditional drama or narrative, building to a climax of action or statement. Browning wishes instead to express the futility of such movement, of such a statement:

> How look a brother in the face and say
> 'Thy right is wrong, eyes hast thou yet art blind'?
>
> (XII.845-6)

We are to look instead for a series of perspectives to emerge which, as a whole, compose a circle, a ring. Just so, we are constrained by human limits, our own and those of the poet/speaker, to circle the truth, all the while gaining perspectives on it but coming more and more to see that it does not reside in particular statements or monologues. It is the poem itself as total work, total expression and form, which expresses truth. Still, our interest in Pompilia does persist, as Browning intends it to do, and provides one focal point for the monologues.

In this regard we can also see that Browning was not attempting to show that truth is non-existent. Had he been, his method would indeed have been quite inefficient. The formal design, to be successful, would have had to move us further and further from any sense that truth is worth pursuing and able to be located, into a world of chaos where man is resigned forever to subjectivity as a condition of human existence. Instead of convincing us that truth does not exist, the ordering of the monologues subtly contributes to a progress towards greater and greater approximation of the truth. The Pope, for all his limitations, is a seer of sorts, whose methods and intentions, at least, are above reproach. Guido's change of tone and story in book XI confirms our sense that truth, if it cannot actually be *known,* has in this case somehow been *served,* and that the effort to discover truth can in and of itself yield positive results. If the poet/speaker must come forth in book XII to remind us that we have not really achieved a secure formulation of truth, that truth lies somewhere mixed in among all these perspectives, such a reminder is different in kind from an assertion that there is no such thing as truth. Neither can the poet/speaker himself lay claim to any ability to express truth (as his resorting to the varied testimonies of others in book XII—a sort of mad scramble for additional perspective—makes clear). The poet as speaker distorts as much as he clarifies our view of the other characters.[18] Only the invisible shaper of the whole, and only then by means of the poem *in toto,* can express truth through the artistic construct of the achieved poem, 'the one way possible / Of speaking truth' (XII.843-4).