

DECEPTION AND ARTIFICE IN FOUR LATE BROWNING POEMS:

PRINCE HOHENSTIEL-SCHWANGAU, FIFINE AT THE FAIR,

RED COTTON NIGHT-CAP COUNTRY AND THE INN ALBUM

by

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ABSTRACT

While deception and its artifices have been recognized as central to Browning's poetry, they have not been examined in his late works. The dominating concept in The Ring and the Book that falsehood is ubiquitous in human existence provides Browning with impetus for the next decade, as he attempts further to understand and dramatize both the means by which man obscures truth, and the circumstances, if any, under which man may act according to some sort of moral perception.

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau presents a persona who manipulates point of view in order to mask his insecurity. His final realization that his political benevolence is an illusion leads not to salvation but to an impasse, since the truth he perceives is that all language is inevitably false, and therefore all arguments inevitably futile. Once he relinquishes deception, he is at the mercy of chance.

Don Juan in Fifine at the Fair flaunts the artifices of language and mind overtly and deliberately. He apprehends both the elements of deception in all perceptual processes, and his dependence for knowledge on the misleading appearances of reality; consequently, he realizes a "histrionic truth" which is based on this realistic understanding of man's limitations and which enables him momentarily to reconcile the conflicting impulses of soul and flesh.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Miranda's disastrous leap of faith is the result of his insufficient strength of intellect to perceive properly the function of religious symbol. All the characters in this

story adhere to external signs, either symbols of belief or indications of social convention. Clara, the cousins and the clergy exploit the possibilities of deception, taking advantage of Miranda's impulsiveness and flawed perception. His death is rational in a perverse sense according to his circumstances and training, but his reasoning functions in terms of a naive literalism. He dies, a victim of the inept attempt of his fancy to merge the reality of illusion with the reality of physical fact.

The Inn Album dramatizes the reaction of three people to the knowledge and discovery of falsehood. The Lord views deception as characterizing human morality and he exploits its possibilities to impose his cynical design on others. The Youth acts impulsively and naturally to destroy it, but he retains the same obtuse idealism at the end with which he admires the Lord at the beginning--he has swapped a master for a mistress. The Lady reacts with horror, trying to escape from falsehood and to purify its leprous touch--her suicide is a kind of martyrdom to the cause of tainted purity. The Lord's social artifices, epitomizing human pretentiousness and sophisticated behaviour, are contrasted with the spontaneous beauty and natural art of the landscape. Man's deceit outrages the civilization of the natural world.

None of these poems offers the purely generous response of right against wrong; even good actions retain an element of selfishness. Browning does, however, allow the reader to judge his characters and his point of view which underlies each poem testifies to at least the possibility of abstracting and authenticating values from human experience.

Much of the interest in these dramas of consciousness lies in the paradoxical ability of reason to perceive good or unselfishness while it simultaneously deceives itself. The refinement of intellect leads to the obscurity of earthly reality as well as to the apprehension of its essentially ambiguous nature. These poems are dramatic, unified and more intelligible than many critics have admitted. They undoubtedly emphasize the experience of the mind, but they are not devoid of emotion. Juan's sense of the "histrionic truth" combines Browning's aesthetic with his metaphysic, and Browning as always locates intellectual questions within the labyrinths of personality.

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, in Essays in Criticism's Critical Forum, Philip Drew referred to Barbara Melchiori's "courage" in writing about Fifine at the Fair.¹ Since then, the poem has been described as one of Browning's "most crucial" by Roma King,² and as one of Browning's "four greatest" by Morse Peckham.³ This revaluation and the excellent analysis by Philip Drew mean that courage is no longer necessary for serious discussion of the poem,⁴ but the long critical tradition which regards Browning's late work as, in L. G. Salingar's phrase, "tedious word-spinning,"⁵ will require more argument yet before it is appreciably altered. Such a perceptive critic as Isobel Armstrong, for example, says there is a "definite decline after The Ring and the Book (1868),"⁶ although she does say in a review of Roma King's recent book, that he "shows conclusively that the later poems are ready for revaluation."⁷ The ultimate purpose of this dissertation is to promote this revaluation; its central and immediate purpose, however, is to advance the understanding of the four selected poems, in the belief that a poem may be fairly evaluated only after it has been carefully examined.

That Browning's interest in character dominates his canon has become the commonplace observation that it ought to be only after the work of Park Honan, Roma King, and more recently, Philip Drew. Browning, of course, stresses not character in action, but "incidents in the development of a soul." The works he created, and the techniques he employed

to create them, are principally concerned with presenting individual character, with describing, particularly in his argumentative poems, the mind in the process of formulating ideas and ordering its complex maze of thought and sense perceptions. Central to this portrayal of character, and to the attempts of the personae to discover truth, about themselves or about their situation, is the problem of deception. Deception is central to the problem of choice and to man's potential for apprehending value or right behaviour, and it is basic to the problem of evil. Because of his emphasis on mental and moral being, and therefore on individual choice and perception, Browning is particularly interested in the means by which people deceive themselves or others. Ambiguity, paradox, subtleties of metaphor and the manipulation of point of view occur frequently in Browning's poetry; they are the artifices which characters use to perpetrate their deceitful or self-deceptive purposes. Of course, in the larger sense of art as artifice, all artifice is the poet's. For critical purposes, however, the artifices exploited by the persona portrayed, in the pursuit of his particular deception, are to be distinguished from the artifices exploited by the poet, in the pursuit of his aesthetic deception. This study is concerned with the former, with thematic content and effect rather than with poetic technique, although aesthetic deception is crucial to Browning's art theory, and poetic artifice enters the discussion where it becomes appropriate, notably in Fifine at the Fair.

The expediencies of deception are recognized, if implicitly, as being central to most of Browning's work, including the best known monologues. Roma King, for example, writes in The Bow and the Lyre that "no

poet has insisted more strenuously than Browning on the complexity of human motives, the illusion of appearances, on ambiguity."⁸ Altick and Loucks comment clearly on the problem as it appears in The Ring and the Book:

Inability or unwillingness to discern truth, no matter how plainly presented, is regrettable enough; but far worse, because it is an inveterate instrument of evil, is man's practice of deception--his exploiting, for selfish ends, the limitations of knowledge and the discrepancy between appearance and reality that are the conditions of earthly existence. In The Ring and the Book falsehood is the form that evil most characteristically takes. Greed is Guido's motive, but the lie is his chosen tool. The events of the poem illustrate many varieties of lie, trick, and deliberate ambiguity.⁹

The pervasiveness of deception as an "instrument of evil" in The Ring and the Book, and the implications in the notion that falsehood is among "the conditions of earthly existence," seem to provide Browning with impetus for the next decade, for in almost all the poems of the 1870's deception is an integral element. The subject has not been satisfactorily examined in these poems, and it provides a convenient approach to four usually neglected works.

Ideally, this study would include all the late poems, after The Ring and the Book, but then, since Browning wrote such a large amount in his last twenty years, it would tend towards a survey, and one of the limitations in Browning criticism has been the proliferation of generalized surveys. At this stage of Browning scholarship, and in view of the complexity of most of the important late works, it seemed best to limit the scope of this examination and to focus more closely on fewer poems. This decision also heeds Philip Drew's directive that "what is most

necessary for an appreciation of Browning's stature is a series of detailed studies of individual poems."¹⁰ The four poems chosen are the best and most significant of the later works, with the exception of some shorter poems such as "Numpholeptos," and notably of The Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day. The Parleyings certainly require further analysis, but they have been the subject of at least one book-length study and one dissertation, so they have received more attention than that generally given to the late poems. Because of their comprehensive structural principles, they also raise distinctive critical problems. For these reasons, and since the selected poems form a neat chronological unit, the Parleyings have not been considered here.

Also, these four poems provide associated studies of four different aspects of deception and its accompanying artifices. Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau presents a persona who manipulates point of view in order to deceive himself into believing that he does have a consistent, responsible identity. His recognition of this deception leaves him unable to act decisively or with conviction. Don Juan in Fifine at the Fair flaunts the artifices of language overtly and deliberately. He apprehends the element of deception in all perceptual processes, his dependence for knowledge on the misleading appearances of reality, and the artifice which is inherent in all experience and thought; consequently, he realizes a "histrionic truth" which is based on the ubiquity of falsehood in human existence, and which enables him momentarily to reconcile the conflicting impulses within his character of the soul and the flesh. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country examines the dilemma of a character who confuses an

emblem with the reality it represents. Léonce Miranda cannot distinguish accurately between illusion and reality, and consequently he dies, a victim of the inept effort of his fancy to merge the reality of illusion with the reality of physical fact. His attempt to handle deception is doomed to failure because of his flawed perception. In contrast, his mistress, his cousins and the church all take advantage of this inadequacy. Finally, The Inn Album probes the manner in which moral nature is obscured and dramatizes the reaction of three people to the knowledge and discovery of falsehood. Despite the attempts of the Lord to enforce his cynical design and unscrupulous purposes on the other characters, reality is gradually revealed. The Lord's social artifices, epitomizing human pretentiousness and sophisticated behaviour, are contrasted with the spontaneous and artless "civilization" of the natural landscape.

Several aspects of these poems are not treated in this study. The question of Browning's language, for example, requires extensive and specialized treatment which is not attempted here. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album exhibit several similarities with the novel, particularly in their realistic presentation of social circumstances, in the use of a controlling narrator somewhat like Thackeray's puppet-master in the first instance, and in the movement towards character in action rather than the more usual Browningsque focus on action in character in the second. Philip Drew, however, has an extended discussion of this critical problem and it would obviously be superfluous to duplicate his comments. Ultimately, as he says, "these two novel-poems must, like Fifine and Schwangau, be judged as poems."¹¹ Drew also has many

observations about these poems as portraits of Victorian life, since Browning employs contemporary subjects and makes numerous contemporary references in each; again it is unnecessary to re-examine the ground which Drew ably covers.¹² A few references to other writers and to possible sources of influence have been included where they seemed to be appropriate, particularly in the discussion of Fifine at the Fair, since the nature of that poem urges a wider perspective, but the value and purpose of this dissertation must lie predominantly in its contribution to the understanding of individual poems.

Drew's recent book and Roma King's The Focusing Artifice contain the best critical discussions of these four poems, and consequently frequent allusions are made to their comments. Repetition is avoided, however, since they do not approach with any serious attention Browning's handling of deception. Though many of their points are argued with, their work (especially Drew's, whose analysis of each poem is more detailed than King's) remains a contribution to critical opinion and commentary which is not superseded here.

King's title refers to Browning's use of art as a means of focusing multifaceted and dynamic truth; his concern is with defining the general nature of Browning's art, the kind of artifice his poetry in its totality effects. The artifice which this dissertation examines is that used by each persona as part of his own design, and therefore the critical approach employed here is distinct from King's. The deceptions which complicate and obscure man's perception are described here as they are dramatized by Browning in each of the four poems. King's point that

Browning's poetry depicts "man's perception of meaning and not Meaning itself" is therefore an initial assumption rather than a final conclusion.

Two distinctions between terms which are used in this dissertation might conveniently be introduced here. First, deception is to be distinguished from illusion. A causal relationship is understood between them, where illusion is the false concept which results from deception. Also, deception is used with its implications of conscious artifice or wilful trickery, although a character may unconsciously deceive himself, without the inference of deliberate deception, or he may be deceived by some external party. Second, personality is to be distinguished from identity. Harold Rosenberg characterizes the difference between personality and identity as essentially the distinction between "being" and "action"; personality is "who" somebody is, while identity is "what" he is. Identity is usually constant, and "change of identity takes place . . . all at once, in a leap, and not as in personality through a continual transformation of elements."¹³ Personality, particularly in a literary sense, is "a psychological condition," while an identity is the result of or the requirement of some public role--a requirement of the plot in literature.¹⁴ Personality and identity are normally consistent with each other, but a dramatic situation very often depends on a conflict between their respective demands. Browning, of course, was fascinated by the discrepancy between public action, or apparent identity, and private impulses and feelings, or personality. This distinction is used mostly for Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, though the terms are to be understood in the sense outlined here whenever they enter the discussion.

With regard to evaluation, the tacit assumption throughout is that Philip Drew is right when he says these poems "all deserve a place among the best Victorian long poems."¹⁵ More specifically, the analysis is intended to reveal that these poems are not the unintelligible "metaphysical quagmires" which they are purported to be.¹⁶ They are dramatic, unified and more carefully structured than many critics have admitted. They undoubtedly emphasize the experience of the mind more than earlier poems, but they are certainly not devoid of emotion. In these long poems, Browning explores the processes of man's thought and dramatizes the artifices of man's intellect. Chapter Five discusses these more evaluative conclusions, and also the more general implications which the poems elicit about Browning's attitude towards the presence of deception in human existence, and particularly its effects on man's ethical perception.

NOTES

¹Philip Drew, "Another View of Fifine at the Fair," EIC, 17 (1967), 247.

²Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. xiv.

³Morse Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries (New York: Braziller, 1970), p. 85.

⁴Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 303-321.

⁵L. G. Salingar, "Robert Browning," From Dickens to Hardy: The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 6 (Penguin, 1958), 254.

⁶Isobel Armstrong, "The Brownings," in The Victorians, ed. A. Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1970), 307.

⁷Victorian Studies, 14 (1970), 208.

⁸Roma King, The Bow and the Lyre (1957; rpt. Ann Arbor Paperbacks: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 128.

⁹R. D. Altick and J. F. Loucks II, Browning's Roman Murder Story (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 84.

¹⁰Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning, p. 428.

¹¹Drew, p. 340; and see pp. 336-341.

¹²See Drew, pp. 282-349, and passim.

¹³Harold Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," in The Tradition of the New (1959), rpt. in Perspectives on Drama, eds. J. L. Calderwood and H. E. Toliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 329.

¹⁴Rosenberg, p. 331.

¹⁵Drew, p. 340.

¹⁶John M. Hitner, "Browning's Grotesque Period," Victorian Poetry, 4 (1966), p. 10.

CHAPTER ONE

PRINCE HOHENSTIEL-SCHWANGAU, SAVIOUR OF SOCIETY: SELF-DECEPTION AND THE ARTIFICE OF POINT OF VIEW

i

In 1904, Edward Dowden found "something almost pathetic" in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau's "sense that the work allotted to him is work of mere temporary utility."¹ The Prince's predicament, however, too clearly approximates the modern sense of futility to become merely pathetic for the post-Existentialist reader. Also, Dowden only partially understands the poem in observing the Prince's sense that his work is impermanent; far more pertinent is the Prince's fundamental sense of his own fleeting and enigmatic existence. The poem dramatizes the Prince's attempts to establish, to his personal satisfaction, a demonstrable, consistent identity through developing a defensible political philosophy, and also his efforts to prove the veracity of his existence through rational and decisive action. His final indecisive state of mind ("The letter goes! Or stays?") and the reduction of his arguments to a mere gambling gesture ("Double or quits!") demonstrate his inability to establish any convincing basis for action, and evince the terrible insecurity which is at the core of his personality.² The Prince's reverie is his attempt to disguise his inner vacuity, to deceive himself into believing that he does have a consistent, responsible identity.

In recent Browning criticism, the only two significant accounts of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau describe the poem in opposite terms. Philip Drew views it as a political satire on Napoleon III, though he does point out that it shows Browning's "fascination with the intricacies of the human mind," whereas Roma King says "Browning's interests here are neither historical nor political, but metaphysical."³ This divergence clearly results from the differing emphasis which each critic places on the poem's meaning and on the area of reality involved in the poem. Drew says, "the poem depends on the contemporary situation"; for him, the Prince's references to an external, historical situation require knowledge of that historical reality for a satisfactory understanding of the poem.⁴ For King, Napoleon III serves Browning only as the pretext for a poem, as "one more opportunity for Browning to depersonalize himself in order to put himself momentarily into someone else."⁵ In Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, says King, Browning "is more interested in the subjective reality of the character than in his relation to the external world."⁶ These conflicting attitudes have appeared previously in criticism of the poem, even within the same paragraph,⁷ and Browning's fusion of historical, psychological and philosophical interest undoubtedly causes problems of interpretation.

Drew and King, however, are both misleading in some degree: Drew, when he says the reader requires historical knowledge to understand the poem, and King, when he says Browning focuses on the subjective elements of character. Drew's references to the historical events of Napoleon III's rule of France clearly add another dimension of irony to the poem,

and enable a historic judgement to be made of the persona which would otherwise be absent. But Drew's interpretation leads him to observe a "weakness in the larger matters of structure and organization,"⁸ and this flaw severely limits the poem's success for him. On the other hand, King's emphasis on the metaphysical problems concerning the persona is closer to the reader's direct experience of the poem and allows unity through the character of the persona, which is usual in Browning's monologues. Park Honan's examination of the two Guido monologues, for example, is devoted to demonstrating the "complexity, intensity and unity" which is to be seen in Browning's dramatic verse when it is approached "in the light of its character-revealing effects."⁹ In view of Drew's discussion, this chapter examines the poem independently of its historical context, and the question of its total effect and structural unity remains an underlying critical problem to be approached through the characteristics and qualities of the persona.

To study "the subjective reality of the character" does not mean, however, that the external world has no significance in the poem. The Prince refers at many points to contemporary figures--such as Comte, Fourier, Metternich, Thiers and Hugo--and to geographical places--such as Rome, Italy, Savoy and Nice--and these references direct attention not only to the reality of the Prince's historical persona, but also to his relationship with the external world which, notwithstanding King's comments, is of intrinsic importance for his character.

Honan observes the numerous images which the Prince takes from trade and industry--optics, mining, chemistry, agriculture, surveying,

smelting, minting, taxation, industrial processes--and the presence of the widest collection of proper nouns in almost any Browning monologue. The former, Honan writes, reflect "the mechanization of his character . . . the dehumanizing effect of a profession itself," and the latter demonstrate his "preoccupation with the social face of Europe . . . and . . . his dilettantish concern for culture."¹⁰ But Honan neglects the Prince's central deception, his contrived identity. The external world is important to the Prince, not so much because he is desperately concerned with its organization, as he pretends, but because it is a means of establishing a stable identity. His eclectic use of images from predominantly mechanical sources underlines his attempt to play the part of a ruler motivated by rational and commonsense purposes. But his apparent materialism, supposedly of benefit to his people, merely obscures his inability to deal successfully with qualitative values and hides the very non-mechanical doubt about his inner security. Honan says "he has become dehumanized by the mechanical leviathan over which he presides," but the final effect of the poem is rather to suggest that the Prince has exploited the mechanical aspects of that leviathan in order to determine his own reality. Similarly, the large number of proper nouns emphasizes his attempt to seize labels--another device he uses to deceive himself about reality. Presumably, the more names he can encompass, the more in contact with the outside world he believes himself to be. Honan is right to remark on the Prince's "dilettantish concern for culture," for this feature evinces his apprehension of surfaces and his inability to deal with essences, itself a reflection of his own indeterminate essence.

This attempt to replace his inner uncertainty with a pragmatic attitude to life is an elaborate artifice for self-deception, and provides the irony in his defence of a conservative opportunism. It explains why Dowden found the argument to lack the "wise enthusiasm" which is present in other apologies for conservatism, such as Burke's.¹¹ The irony may also account for the numerous references, such as W. O. Raymond's, which assert the Prince's "sophistical pleas" or the "hollowness" of his casuistry, without indicating why his argument is fallacious. Raymond's only evidence is Browning's temperamental antipathy to "timorous, prudential, time-serving policies," seen in other poems such as "The Statue and the Bust."¹² The Prince's argument, as Drew points out, is not easily refuted,¹³ and yet it is unconvincing. This is because the Prince himself is unconvinced. His discourse may be rationally sound within the confines of his given and imagined situation, but he knows finally that it is verbal and therefore deceptive. It merely obscures the fundamental truth that he is concerned first with himself (2102-2103), not with his people, and that the construction of his policies is an attempt to rationalize his existence and identity rather than to rationalize his actions as ruler.

In the persona of the Prince, Browning dramatizes the relationship between philosophy and psychology in such a way as to expose the Prince's inherently weak will and the biased attitude which underlies his pose of objective rationality. The final impression which the Prince leaves is not one of the mechanically operating animal, the product of a systematic social organization, which Honan describes, it is rather one of

extreme indecision and uncertainty. In this respect, the poem reflects Browning's stated objection to his historical source: ". . . there has been no knavery, only decline and fall of the faculties . . ." ¹⁴ Elsewhere, he blamed Napoleon's will: "We all, in our various degrees, took the man on trust, believed in his will far too long after the deed was miserably inadequate to what we supposed the will." ¹⁵ Browning's intention, then, was satirical. W. C. DeVane says the poem, "was a satire in effect because, as we now know, Browning did not believe that any justification of the Emperor's conduct was possible." ¹⁶ But if the effect depends on what "we now know," Drew is right to talk of its failures. Browning's satirical purpose, however, can be observed in the poem itself; on analysis, the reader is able to discern the Prince's selfish impulses, and the impressive artifices which he exploits to evade the truth about his inner weaknesses.

The most obvious artifice used by the Prince to deceive himself is the dream or reverie. The whole of the poem until line 2070 is an illusion in the Prince's mind, his moment of waking being clearly signified by a half-rhyme between the two sections. ¹⁷ Until this point, the reader is led to believe in the Prince's existence as he converses in Leicester Square. The debate between Sagacity and the Head complicates his presence, but it is still effective. When the dream is revealed, the reader is forced dramatically to realize he has been deceived--the fact was fancy, reality was illusion. ¹⁸ This effect of the poem directly represents part of the Prince's dilemma in having to perceive the nature of his reality through the web of language, which he weaves for himself.

in his reverie. Of necessity, human cogitation and expression is verbal, yet "somehow words deflect /As the best cannon ever rifled will" (2133-2134). The paradox is one which occurs in many Browning poems--in Sordello, for example, where part of Sordello's difficulty is that "perceptions whole . . . /reject so pure a work of thought /As language"; in The Ring and the Book, where the Pope recognizes the "filthy rags of speech, this coil /Of statement, comment, query and response, /Tatters all too contaminate for use"; and in the parleying "With Charles Avison," where Avison refers to the "Poet's word-mesh."¹⁹ George M. Ridenour's use of this last example, in association with the "web" image in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" and with his reference to Browning's "practice in the late discursive poems," is pertinent to Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, where the Prince exploits the web of language as a means for catching reality.²⁰

The illusion is a reverie rather than a dream ("My reverie concludes, as dreaming should, /With daybreak"; 2146-2147), in the sense that it is a half-conscious exploration of an imagined situation, rather than an unconscious sequence of images. It is provoked by the Prince's need to make some practical decision about sending a letter to his Cousin-Duke, and the requirements of this choice lead him to question his political philosophy and public achievement, and thereby his fundamental character. The construction of the reverie and the development of its argument dramatize a mind in the conscious act of defending itself. The whole poem takes place within the Prince's mind, which in the purest sense presents Arnold's "dialogue of the mind with itself,"

and which therefore makes the poem central to the nineteenth-century fascination with divided sensibilities.

Hohenstiel-Schwangau is in the position of creating his own poem, and his relationship in the concluding section to the previous two parts (the reverie divides itself naturally into two sections, with the break before the Thiers-Hugo episode) is that of an author to his created work.²¹ In effect, he turns a soliloquy into a dramatic monologue by imagining an audience who will fulfil his need for somebody to judge him and aid him in his decision about the letter. Critics have frequently observed the manner in which the auditor in a dramatic monologue symbolizes some inner aspect of the speaker. Honan develops this notion to suggest that "the speaker is always larger than his audience. He includes the audience characteristics presented."²² In Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, the auditor is literally encompassed by the speaker's character. Despite this, she functions less as an externalized symbol or as a catalyst for argument, than as an audience to act before. In this subordination, her role is closer to the police in "Fra Lippo Lippi" than to Lucrezia in "Andrea del Sarto." She is a hypothetical listener and consequently her responses to the Prince's arguments are of relative unimportance. Her intrusions diminish in frequency as the poem proceeds and of far greater significance for the development of the dialectic are the Prince's critics, whom he quotes.

Insofar as his Laïs does represent elements in the Prince, she intimates three of the impulses which underlie his reverie: his desire for friendly counsel in this moment of personal, though political,

decision, his anxiety for a private, sympathetic judge who will hear his case, and his need for an outside observer to applaud his performance. Her function can be seen to shift in the course of the poem as these impulses vary in importance, and as the Prince seeks increasing objectivity in order to validate his apology.

Initially, she is a friendly female companion who flatters the Prince's social urbanity and who indulgently accedes to his mildly comic flirtations. He proposes to "tell all . . . for Laïs' sake, /Who finds [him] hardly grey, and likes [his] nose, /And thinks a man of sixty at the prime" (18-21), and later he addresses her as a "good young lady . . . /Despite a natural naughtiness or two" (184-185). At this point, she is the ideal companion for an aging and lonely ruler--intimate, discreet and willing to listen. (Perhaps there is a certain wish-fulfilment in choosing such an auditor.) However, the Prince's reverie has purposes other than imagining the interest he might arouse in some "bud-mouthed" Oedipus (2). He would like her not only to understand him but also to judge him, which becomes clear mid-way in the poem, when he addresses her as "fair judge," and when he concludes the first section with "God will estimate /Success one day; and, in the meantime--you!" (1212-1213). She now represents his inner desire for an opinion of his character and political performance, and to facilitate her task he places her in her final role as reader of the historical chapter by Thiers-Hugo. In this passive and objective role, she withdraws completely, enabling the Prince to concentrate on the debate between Sagacity and the Head. Finally, when he is aroused from his fantasy by the clock, he announces through a

theatrical metaphor that the whole situation was a simulation: "Exile, Leicester-square, the life /I' the old gay miserable time" had been "rehearsed" and "tried on again like cast clothes" in case they might still "serve /At a pinch" (2075-2078). It was all "A nod /Out-Homerizing Homer!" (2080-2081), a wry comment which, in terms of the common phrase "Homer sometimes nods," admits the dullness of his monologue, and which consciously associates the reverie with a poetic creation, giving an illusory reality to its participants. Unlike other dramatic monologues where the auditor is a tacitly assumed artifice in the form, in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau the auditor is an acknowledged artifice.

An important feature of the Prince's control over the poem is that he emerges as one of Browning's most self-conscious characters. He has "a remarkably full grasp of events, and of the tentative nature of his own arguments."²³ Certain asides throughout the poem, such as "grant the phrase" (277), mark his awareness of his rhetoric, but his acuity is most apparent in two passages: when he moves from the monologue to the Thiers-Hugo section, and in the conclusion. When he wakes to realize the futility of his reverie, he demonstrates his understanding of the corruptions inherent in language: "Alack, one lies oneself /Even in the stating that one's end was truth" (2123-2124). He would prefer "the inner chamber of the soul" for argument, since "there /One pits the silent truth against a lie" (2126-2128; the implication that truth is silent is a remarkable revelation for such a voluble monologuist), but "words have to come" (2133). He realizes that his reverie was a series of falsehoods achieved through the artifices of language, but his

comments before part two (the Thiers-Hugo episode) elicit his awareness of another means of deception--a controlled point of view.

There, my arch stranger-friend, my audience both
 And arbitress, you have one half your wish,
 At least: you know the thing I tried to do!
 All, so far, to my praise and glory--all
 Told as befits the self-apologist,--
 Who ever promises a candid sweep
 And clearance of those errors miscalled crimes
 None knows more, none laments so much as he,
 And ever rises from confession, proved
 A god whose fault was--trying to be man.
 Just so, fair judge,--if I read smile aright--
 I condescend to figure in your eyes
 As biggest heart and best of Europe's friends,
 And hence my failure. (1199-1212)

He is aware that everything he has said so far is to his "praise and glory," aware that self-confession in terms of reliable, objective judgement is a failure because it presents only one, biased view. Because confession gains sympathy (confession is as much for forgiveness as for judgement), it subsumes judgement, and hence the apologist "rises from confession, proved /A god." He wishes to create the illusion of giving his hearer every chance to judge him, however, and therefore he attempts to rectify the situation by rejecting autobiography and by presenting his life as if written by a combined novelist and historian, Thiers-Hugo.

A plague of the return to "I--I--I
 Did this, meant that, hoped, feared the other thing!"
 Autobiography, adieu! The rest
 Shall make amends, be pure blame, history
 And falsehood: not the ineffective truth,
 But Thiers-and-Victor-Hugo exercise.
 Hear what I never was, but might have been
 I' the better world where goes tobacco-smoke!
 Here lie the dozen volumes of my life:
 (Did I say "lie"? the pregnant word will serve). (1218-1227)

He now dramatizes his actions and arguments as if reported from an objective point of view; he changes his technique from that of an apologist to that of a social observer, in effect changing the technique of his reverie from a dramatic monologue to a novel. It is important to note the manner in which he introduces the new method. He is no longer going to present himself by way of the truth ("ineffective" because from only one point of view), but by way of "history and falsehood," by "pure blame" or "Thiers-and-Victor-Hugo exercise." His appellation and description capitalize on the popular and obvious notion that fiction, even though in the form of history, is a lie, and therefore to be mistrusted. He immediately establishes one level of irony by implying that only falsehood can reveal the truth. In a rhetorical flourish designed to lessen the auditor's suspicions, he playfully allows, and thereby makes explicit, the ambiguity in lie. His artifice here, then, is to say that his presentation is false, so that his judge, instead of seeking falsehood in truth, will look for truth in falsehood.

This paradox links the Prince's exercise in deception with Browning's aesthetic practice and theory.²⁴ The moral problem that art is a lie is not new to Browning and he combines here the Prince's deceit with the poem's illusion, so that both falsehoods paradoxically contain truth for the reader. (This intermingling of art, morality and metaphysics occurs again in Fifine at the Fair.) The Prince's conscious manipulation of confessional techniques and their potential for receiving understanding sympathy rather than unimpassioned judgement also combines his personal predicament with Browning's artistic dilemma. Despite a monologist's

plea of honest and objective confession, his presentation is inevitably biased by his point of view. This invokes the epistemological problem of knowing truth in the face of this serious limitation in judging such a controlled point of view. The possibility arises that a skilled and conscious manipulator of confessional technique without external opposition could argue a selfish concept with impunity. This possibility is enhanced by the Prince's second technique of self-explanation, which is equally a failure, with the first, for external judgement, since its point of view is still controlled by the Prince, not by its ostensible author, Thiers-Hugo.

In a novel, the reader has to rely on the narrator's control and information for perceiving truth and for judging character; consequently, it becomes even more difficult to judge the Prince adversely in part two than in part one, without information external to the poem. Without giving this reason, Drew arrives at a similar conclusion.²⁵ To emphasize this obstacle in perceiving a culpable persona, however, is to avoid the real point that the artifice employed in part two makes the Prince's defense more effective, and testifies even further to his intellectual ability. The only way to expose the deception behind this illusion is to reveal the underlying assumption that everything given is controlled by the author, in this instance the Prince. It is all therefore from his limited and naturally protective point of view, so only the kind of illusion created differs from part one. The poem is instructive both as an object lesson in literary control and as an illustration of the manner in which a mind defends itself through the deception of a carefully

regulated field of vision. However, the resulting illusion is only an outward one, which the Prince's perception brings him finally to realize.

This skilled manipulation of the poem's form by the persona does not mean that the reader cannot recognize the recurring impulses and predispositions in his character, which emerge despite the care he exercises to disguise them. Part one, particularly, contains the usual inadvertent character revelation of the dramatic monologue; in this poem, however, the monologue exposes not so much casuistry, in the sense of erroneous or fallacious arguments, as an emotional anxiety and selfish scepticism which underlie the speaker's philosophy.²⁶

ii

The Prince opens his monologue in a mildly bantering manner which is both ingratiating and lighthearted. He appears amused by his companion's desire to know him ("Wise men, 'tis said, have sometimes wished the same, /And wished and had their trouble for their pains"; 4-5), and yet his flirtatious teasing about her interest--"Who finds me hardly grey, and likes my nose" (20)--masks the importance to him of the task proposed: "Revelment of myself!" By casting himself first as the Sphinx, he immediately posits the riddle of his actions and identity. But despite the apparent spontaneity of his gesture, he seems eager to have "justice rendered" to "the good trick which served the turn," and, particularly, to avoid classification with Home's charlatanism (6-14). The Sphinx metaphor, in its evocation of a significant mythological

figure, is flattering to the Prince, but he also introduces a comic element in the image of his Oedipus lurking "Under a pork-pie hat and crinoline" and pouncing "on Sphinx in Leicester Square" (6-8). This fusion of the archetypal with the commonplace and trivial creates a sense of flippancy which recurs as the poem proceeds; as yet it is amusing, but as the artifice accumulates, its effect borders on an unhealthy scepticism.

He next performs the lesson of the blots (inevitably referred to by the poem's commentators), which, he says, illustrates his fundamental impulse to "turn to best account the thing /That's half-made" rather than to "Make what is absolutely new" (85-88). Even as he does this, however, a number of incidental phrases require attention. While he joins the two blots with his right hand, his left "Pulled smooth and pinched the moustache to a point" (44)--again the flippant gesture, this time physical. In his mention of Euclid and geometry, the first of numerous references to scientific matters, the phrase "moral mathematics" (52) suggests a desire to deal with human values in a quantitative manner. He also says he "knew how to extend" the two blots "into a line /Symmetric on the sheet they blurred before" (89-90); the contrast between "symmetric" and "blurred" implies that he created order from disorder, adding a concern for organization to his interest in empirical data. After the initial impression of witty sophistication, he seems now to be developing the image of an educated and rational intelligence. Yet, to maintain the rapport with his less knowledgeable companion, he continues with a jovial and earthy humility:

leave this first
 Clod of an instance we began with, rise
 To the complete world many clods effect.
 Only continue patient while I throw,
 Delver-like, spadeful after spadeful up,
 Just as truths come, the subsoil of me, mould
 Whence spring my moods. (93-99)

Even this genial self-depreciation employs a geological metaphor which suggests that he is being objective and honest, that truth is available upon analysis of his spadefuls:

your object,--just to find,
 Alike from handlift and from barrow-load,
 What salts and silts may constitute the earth . . . (99-101)

In the first scoop of earth (111ff.), he explains his relationship with God, reconciling the apparently contradictory notions that he lives "to please himself" and that he recognizes an "immeasurable" power greater than his own (111-117). His tone is now that of a philosopher making careful mental distinctions:

I,--not He,--
 Live, think, do human work here--no machine,
 His will moves, but a being by myself,
 His, and not He who made me for a work,
 Watches my working, judges its effect,
 But does not interpose. (120-125)

The purpose of his argument in this section (111-229) is to separate his will and his existence from God's, and yet to maintain that he fulfils God's purpose; the artifices employed to assert his position illustrate the manner in which his argument is not captious, but avoid certain implications contained in it. The central metaphor for his

relationship with God is the courier. A courier, once given his task, may execute it by whatever means and in whatever manner he chooses; when his journey is completed, his performance will be judged by his employer, not before; as the courier is to the Prince, so the Prince is to God. The analogy is not false, and yet the courier's relationship with his master differs from the Prince's with his God in one respect which the Prince here ignores: the courier, unlike the Prince, receives a direct and specific command. Emphasis is placed on the means of performing the task and on the judgement of that means, avoiding for the moment the question of what that task is and, more particularly, how the Prince knows what it is. A little later, he will describe his "mission," but here his effort focuses on the assertion that his actions were wrought according to God's intention. He acknowledges the "inter-communication" which some men have with God, and mentions the "varied modes of creature-ship" which imply "just as varied intercourse" with their Creator (170-183). The impression is that the Prince has a dialogue with God, except of a kind different from others, but by his own analogy he receives only one message which conveys his task, and that is hardly intercourse. His lady companion, whom he types as one who continually seeks divine guidance, suggests that he consciously pursues emancipation from God (199-200). He answers this by directing her attention to the duty of every man, however menial his daily work, to take "the path appointed him," and by involving her insincerity with his (205-206, 217)--a rhetorical device which avoids the question rather than answers it, since she will presumably be reluctant to accuse herself of insincerity. The

interrelationship between his duty and the duty of the "little lives of men" anticipates his concern for the poor and less fortunate citizens of his country, which he professes later. Certainly no-one would wish to criticize him for associating himself with ordinary people, yet this should not conceal his phrasing when he says each man should follow the path which is "appointed him /By whatsoever sign he recognize" (215-216); this, of course, leaves the way clear to decide his own task at will. Neither should the admirable religious sentiments in always acting with regard to ultimate, not immediate, divine judgement deflect attention from his acknowledged concern not only with what his "head and heart /Prescribed," but also with "every sort of helpful circumstance" (235-240; *my italics*).

The advantages in the form of divine relationship outlined by the Prince are threefold. He may simultaneously claim divine authority for his purpose and decide for himself the means of pursuing those purposes. (If divine guidance is continually sought, it might, of course, vary from what is politically opportune.) In subjecting all his methods to heavenly judgement, he gives the impression of subordinating himself to ideals higher than human expediency. In claiming to work always to the end of becoming "the creature [he] was bound /To be," and not to thwart "God's purpose in creation" (246-248), he in effect shifts the responsibility for his motivations and actions onto God who began it all. These advantages are particularly important in preparing the way for the Prince's later defence against accusations that he works solely by opportunism, lacking any higher ideal, but their validity is entirely dependent on

his claim to sincerity. The diversion from his listener's query about conscious emancipation is legitimate in emphasizing that very point.

At this stage of the poem, there is insufficient evidence to judge the Prince's integrity fairly. Nevertheless, there are three hints that his piety might consist of convenient linguistic expressions: heaven and earth are "figures which assist our sense" (114; my italics); life's failure or success is "What folk call being saved or cast away" (252; my italics); and his auditor is asked to "grant the phrase" when he refers to his "mission" (277; my italics). Perhaps a crucial point is his desire to "please [himself] on the great scale, /Having regard to immortality /No less than life" (233-235). He seeks to combine his political, earthly aims with spiritual, heavenly purposes, to reconcile what may otherwise seem opposite principles, and his desire to balance different views is one of his basic emotional and intellectual instincts.

He maintains a similar balance in public affairs. His "mission," he says, is

to rule men--men within my reach,
To order, influence and dispose them so
As render solid and stabilize
Mankind in particles, the light and loose,
For their good and my pleasure in the act. (278-282)

The combination of public good with personal satisfaction and fulfilment is probably the ideal defence for a political figure, as long as an equilibrium is maintained and the second does not interfere with the first. The Prince's disarming honesty in admitting that his own pleasure is involved no doubt helps to overcome fears that personal satisfaction

might upset the balance. Frankness is one of his most useful and frequently used artifices for promoting plausibility. His appraisal of himself in the next section, for example, where he describes himself as a conservator, "possibly" a man most useful to his fellows, but not one of the greatest minds or rarest natures (294-297), deflects criticism and draws sympathy as an objective and fair-minded judgement. Equitable self-evaluation is another kind of balance, and the Prince's desire for equalizing opposites is essentially a passion for order. He makes this desire explicit in saying that he aims to "stabilify /Mankind" (280-281), and in professing "to trace /The broken circle of society, /Dim actual order" (300.302). It is, of course, a perfectly reasonable passion.

The poem proceeds with an important passage about the Prince's concern for social order and about the nature of change. The regeneration of society occurs at irregular intervals and is brought about by men of exceptional character; the Prince, however, says that he is not such a man and that his time does not require such radical change. He accepts the fact that rebirth must inevitably occur some time, but it seems a reluctant admission as he renders the processes of change ambiguous. He employs a geographical illustration for these processes, and though the result of change is "New teeming growth . . . a world broke up /And re-made," even "order gained by law destroyed" (341-343), the act of change means a terrifying upheaval: Earth's "mountains tremble into fire, her plains /Heave blinded by confusion" (339-340). The value of the man who promotes this upheaval is also made ambiguous by a list of such men which includes a "dervish desert-spectre" and "swordsman" as

well as a "saint, /Law-giver" and "lyrist" (350-351). The Prince's phrasing of the breaking up of ice-tracts is attractively handled, and his description of what is lost is an example of his ability to achieve a splendid lyricism:

there's an end of immobility,
Silence, and all that tinted pageant, base
To pinnacle, one flush from fairyland
Deep-asleep and deserted somewhere,--see!--
As a fresh sun, wave, spring and joy outburst. (333-337)

Certainly, "joy" comes forth, but the impressive tone in imaging the lost fairyland suggests that the Prince prefers its silent immobility, not because what is new is not valuable, but because of the confusion and the dissipation of order necessary to bring it about. His selection of irregular and violent geological transformation may also be seen as an artifice designed to reinforce the dangers inherent in physical, and by analogy social, change. To employ metaphors of seasonal variation would undermine his effect, since that form of regeneration is regular as well as inevitable. In this passage, the Prince's passion for order insinuates a covert fear of disorder.

After dramatizing the contradictory attitudes of his critics, and incidentally giving another demonstration of his infrequent felicity with words ("Leave uneffaced the crazy labyrinth /Of alteration and amendment"; 382-383), the Prince reiterates his conservative aim, to "Do the best with the least change possible" (397). He says he will prepare the way for the man of genius who is to renew society, establishing a "good hard substance, not mere shade and shine" (411) for this man to build on.

Hohenstiel-Schwangau's hope for mankind is "something equably smoothed everywhere, /Good, reconciled with hardly-quite-as-good, /Instead of good and bad each jostling each" (429-431). A conciliation in the latter sense is acceptable, even if an "equably smoothed" society is a somewhat bland proposition. Man toils such a long time before producing any change in "the heart of things," concludes the Prince, that not even a cigar whiff should be risked for "Fourier, Comte, and all that ends in smoke!" (434-439)--a reference which typifies the use of proper names in the poem. The theories and proposals of Fourier and Comte are not distinguished or analysed, but in casually inserting their names into his conversation, the Prince can pretend to a familiarity with contemporary intellectual thought; his equally casual dismissal of them into the realms of smoke disposes of that thought without the need for further consideration.

The Prince next emphasizes his plan for the coexistence of various kinds of moral happiness (440-472). It is another praiseworthy endeavour, provided, as the Prince points out in one of his comically frivolous images, "each toe spares its neighbour's kibe" (450). To "rule and regulate the course," making sure that "none impede the other's path" (460-466), is the Prince's chosen purpose, yet his mechanical metaphor for society ("the whole machine should march /Impelled by those diversely-moving parts"; 466-467) is significantly at variance with his concern for qualitative ("moral, mark!--not material"; 446) happiness. The quality of moral happiness implies a series of fine gradations, whereas mechanical order is a relatively gross and blunt systematization. The

"machine" image invokes the Prince's earlier reference to "moral mathematics" (52) and further demonstrates his preference for the quantitative ordering of human values. Since a society which moves smoothly and machine-like is one where feelings, emotions and qualitative judgements bring no unruly disturbances, the image also reinforces his desire to avoid uncontrolled circumstances, where the course of political action might be uncertain.

Continuing his monologue, the Prince reaches an important summation:

I think that to have held the balance straight
 For twenty years, say, weighing claim and claim,
 And giving each its due, no less no more,
 This was good service to humanity,
 Right usage of my power in head and heart,
 And reasonable piety beside.
 Keep those three points in mind while judging me! (473-479)

This is a crucial element in his apology, since it shows his attempt to combine an external balance in social order, the judicial sustaining of equality for all points of view, with an internal integration between head, heart and god (or between intellect, emotion and spirit, insofar as he believes in spirit). His "right usage" of his head and heart in controlling social order is an act which, for him, fuses identity and personality--to make Harold Rosenberg's distinction between these terms.²⁷ Political action such as the Prince describes would establish his identity as a self-possessed, rational and ideologically comprehensive ruler. This identity coincides with the impulses for unity and the fear of chaos which characterize his personality, and the underlying object of

the monologue is to reach a decision which would continue to demonstrate the identity of a real and integrated personality. The Prince creates the illusion that his natural personality is expressed through social action which combines the fulfilment of his public identity with political advantage to his people. His political philosophy is therefore designed to unite his psychological state with his public identity, and this intention is fraught with the complexities of his intellectual effort to sustain the illusion.

One part of his argument must rest on the position that his conservative policies suit the conditions of his nation. His repeated asseverations that the time and "state of things" demand conservative rule (e.g., 352-354, 440-442) are an important element of his political debate. In terms of his psychology, they are crucial artifices to support his implied claim that the qualities he possesses for action coincide remarkably with the qualities required by the social situation for its successful rule. Harold Rosenberg comments on the identity and personality predicament in Hamlet:

In [Hamlet], the action of a person, which is the expression of a psychological condition, is contrasted with that of an identity, which always takes place in response to his role--which he performs as required of him by the plot, by the whole in which he is located. . . . Hamlet has all the qualities required for action; what he lacks is the identity structure which would fit him to be a character in a drama, a one-ness with his role originating in and responding to the laws of his dramatic world.²⁸

Hohenstiel-Schwangau's dilemma involves a similar contrast, with the difference that he lacks Hamlet's inner personal qualities and that his reverie is an attempt to hide this deficiency. In this regard, the

relationship with God which he specifies earlier becomes relevant. His freedom of will in determining the means for pursuing his assigned task assures the Prince, since he is his own auditor, that his actions do express his individual personality, or conversely that he does not act merely in accord with external circumstances. (The latter situation would place him in Hamlet's predicament, which he is trying to avoid, albeit through self-deception.) The success of the Prince's claim is always dubious, however, because unlike Hamlet he controls, in this reverie, his own "dramatic world," and therefore is in a position to describe that world in such a way that the action required by it would indicate an identity admirably suited to his "psychological condition."

The fruitful union of his personality with the external circumstances is also the point behind his description of his "double joy";

This is the honour,--that no thing I know,
 Feel or conceive, but I can make my own
 Somehow, by use of hand or head or heart:
 This is the glory,--that in all conceived,
 Or felt or known, I recognize a mind
 Not mine but like mine,--for the double joy,--
 Making all things for me and me for Him. (570-576)

Because he can both make all that he perceives his own--whether through sense, emotion or intellect--and recognize in all this a mind not his but like his, the two--God and Prince--are interdependent. This satisfying communion with God effectively symbolizes the summation of his desires: the integration of self, achieved through an interdependence of external circumstance and internal personality which could not be effected without this integration and which therefore proves its existence. The

Prince's heaven, a grand reconciliation of polarities (589-598), similarly symbolizes his strong impulses to unify warring elements.²⁹ Ironically, the reconciliation is an illusion, and what appears to be interdependence is a one way affair, with all relationships dependent on the Prince's point of view. The integrated self is not proved, although there is also a further irony that the Prince finally does achieve a form of equilibrium in his character, and thereby renders himself incapable of making a decision.

Another necessary part of the argument for preserving society must be that society is worth preserving. The Prince pursues this point in two ways: by heavily criticizing those who belittle man's nature, particularly poets (499-612); and by asserting that evil is a necessary agent for good (620-646). The second proposition is a version of the doctrine of imperfection, familiar in Browning's work. The first argument, however, has more dubious merit. An argument by negation, it emphasizes not the value of man's nature, but the worthlessness of those who deride that value. The Prince accuses the Bard of engaging in wilful deception in order to establish his personal superiority over other men and over the "visible universe." This accusation would appeal to the popular desire for poetic sincerity,³⁰ based as it is on the kind of aesthetic attitudes seen in Bentham's "The Rationale of Reward" ("Truth, exactitude of every kind, is fatal to poetry")³¹--an appropriate attitude for a pragmatic politician perhaps, particularly when he wants to divert questions about truth away from himself. Basically, however, the Prince refutes by travesty rather than by argument, and his performance frequently

verges on mere ridicule:

"O sun, O moon, ye mountains and thou sea,
Thou emblem of immensity, thou this,
That, and the other,--what impertinence
In man to eat and drink and walk about
And have his little notions of his own,
The while some wave sheds foam upon the shore!" (521-526)

The whole passage, including the reduction of the pathetic fallacy to a matter of ventriloquy (540), is a travesty which by exposing the Prince's philistinism,³² suggests a certain disingenuousness if not cynicism on his part,³³ despite his plea that he has the interests of all men at heart. His immediate purpose again is the matter of equality and co-operation. The poet must not be allowed to suggest that man is inferior to nature, or that some men are inferior to others; the Prince's philosophy is one of all-embracing tolerance and cohesion between disparities.

When he turns from describing his aim to discussing "the means thereto" (649), he again pauses to develop a long aside reiterating his refusal to destroy existing objects, even if destruction were the proper work to choose. In the sustained elaborateness of its structure, the episode is evidence of his verbal skill, but it also makes apparent the obsessive quality in his plan for preservation. The repetition of his aspirations is becoming tedious for the reader, but the tedium should not hide the point that his dismissal of doubt about the correctness of his "end"--"Can there be question which was the right task-- /To save or to destroy society?" (653-654)--emphasizes his choice as one between saving or destroying society. He now, conveniently, ignores the possibility of change, whereas earlier, when discussing his action with the

blots, he presented his choice as one between creating something new or making "the best of the old" (263-268).

After the emotional and rhetorical tone of this digression, the Prince once more assumes the role of an objective and honest apologist: "the means /Whereby to save [society],--there begins the doubt /Permitted you, imperative on me" (701-703). He continues to play down his own ego ("Sustaining is no brilliant self-display /Like knocking down or even setting up"; 712-713) as a ploy to avoid hints that he acted in his own interest; yet his reference to man's regard for Hercules as mightier than Atlas implies that he deserves the recognition due an Atlas who bore the earth's load continually, not just for one day. The Prince is careful always to maintain a balance, even in his own self-appraisal.

Following the immediate introduction of what will constitute his most important and viable defence of his conservative policy--his sympathy for the mass of ordinary people, those that "sought the daily bread and nothing more" (742)--he dramatizes the demands of his critics, and particularly the demand that he choose one of their causes (776-779). In the process of accusing him of lacking high aspirations (760-766) and of pursuing a "sham policy" (801), the critic outlines some of the specific polarities faced by Hohenstiel-Schwangau: strict faith or vague incredulity, social hierarchy or democratic freedom, foreign policy or domestic reform, and complying with the nation by fighting or snubbing the nation by seeking peace (780-793). One further policy--"Bid /Hohenstiel-Schwangau first repeal the tax /On pig-tails and pomatum, and then mind /Abstruser matters for next century!" (793-796)--employs one of the

Prince's typical travesties against himself, and the critic exploits the clumsiness of the Prince's name for a similar satiric effect: "print /By force of arms . . . /Hohenstiel-Schwangau on the universe!" (787-790). He characterizes the Prince's all-inclusive conservatism as an oscillating and "tantalizing help" for alternate sides, and finally concludes with a crucial paradox: "Your choice, /Speak it out and condemn yourself thereby!" (804-805). A choice would condemn the Prince because it would deny his principles of tolerance for all views; it would commit him to one specific policy which would render him more vulnerable to attack if proved wrong. In what amounts, in terms of the larger illusion, to self-deprecation, the critic says the Prince's attempt to maintain a comprehensive view, not limited by a single perspective, is a

"sham policy,
 Sure ague of the mind and nothing more,
 Disease of the perception or the will,
 That fain would hide in a fine name!" (801-804).

This accusation points to the heart of the matter: the Prince's philosophy as a means of deception, pursued for personal purposes, a "disease of the perception." In one sense his dilemma is not an "ague of the mind," but a too agile mind which aspires to encompass all views; it is fit enough, after all, to embrace its own criticism and finally its error. However, the suspicion remains that the Prince will not choose any single course of action lest it involve a wrong decision. It is an important accusation in terms of the poem's total purpose, since it intimates the Prince's personal insecurity, and its critical significance is only

superseded by the cry that he has not acted upon the ideals which he once had as a youth. This cry--"we desiderate performance, deed /For word" (881-882)--is directly pertinent to the political decision that provokes the reverie and to the Prince's defense of inaction; the two, of course, are concomitant.

The Prince's arguments in the remainder of part one (the next 400 lines) are of mixed quality and exemplify the ambivalence which distinguishes his personality. He answers his critic's demands for choice by referring to man's limited life span: guarantee him a hundred years and he would concentrate on one cause, since he too, he claims, has a cause. But in describing how he once "took wings, soared sunward, and thence sang" (821) of his ideals, he gives to his expression a taint of scepticism which undermines his sincerity. The image of soaring sunward on wings implicitly parodies both the critic's previous images wanting the Prince to look upward with "more of the eagle eye" (764), and the myth of Icarus; the latter, particularly, renders youthful idealism absurd rather than inspired. After the Prince has outlined his ideals--a united Italy, free trade, free press, universal suffrage, labour rights (871-873)--there is a further interweaving of rhetoric between Prince and critic. The critic picks up the Prince's "voice only" metaphor for impractical idealism to apply it against him, and after denying the Prince's achievements says he stands either false or weak--false in promises or weak in their implementation. The Prince, of course, admits to neither. He puts the words that man "craves finer fare, nor lives by bread alone" (898) into the critic's mouth (and includes a subtle

criticism by having the critic forget where the quote is from; 899) and then uses it in his first justification for not acting out his ideals. He could not fulfil his intentions because practical conditions demanded certain priorities: "'Not bread alone' but bread before all else /. . . the bodily want serve first, said I" (918-919). This is the strongest possible argument, but it leads on to derogatory remarks about democracy ("diverse hundred thousand fools may vote /. . . /And so elect Barabbas deputy /In lieu of his concurrent"; 932-935) which again suggest that he argues an appropriate rather than a sincere case.³⁴

The Prince's second justification rests on the paradox that social development entails social disintegration:

man is made in sympathy with man
At outset of existence, so to speak;
But in dissociation, more and more,
Man from his fellow, as their lives advance
In culture . . . (948-952)

Man is faced with the contradictory promptings of nature--to "consult" the ordinary demands of men and women (971-973), and to "care . . . for thyself alone" (974-979)--which are particularly difficult to resolve for a ruler of society. The Prince explains the predicament through evolutionary theory--he has always shown a predilection for scientific, empirical references--which supports his political policies in a number of ways. It accounts for his personal deficiencies: he had to "cut probation short," not having time to experience all social grades as part of an ideal apprenticeship or evolution for his task as prince (994-1011). Evolution is a slow process: "God takes time" (1011). Hence the

Prince's concern for the development of society through the gradual degrees of natural growth. Finally, evolution testifies to the interdependence of man and nature, and of the varying stages of growth. Having been lodged successively in hole, cave, hut, tenement, mansion and palace, the Prince finds himself "loftier i' the last," but "not more emancipate" (1016). Progress does not mean he can sever the link with his past, yet neither does this inability to free himself mean his identity is dependent on his surroundings: "From first to last of lodging, I was I, /And not at all the place that harboured me" (1017-1018). This notion both refers back to his dilemma in wanting to establish an identity which adequately expresses his personality, without merely capitulating to circumstances, and explains his action in serving man's common demands. His inextricable kinship with nature and with other men leads him to recognize mankind "in all its height and depth and length and breadth" (1056), and therefore he will not allow social superiority to blind him to the requirements of the less fortunate:

I, being of will and power to help, i' the main,
Mankind, must help the least wants first. (1058-1059)

These admirable sentiments are reduced in value by the next passage, where the implications again allude to the Prince's selfish bias. He refers once more to the short life (an average of twenty years, he says; 811) available to men, presumably expecting his account of the inadequate time for a proper apprenticeship (994-1011) to bring sympathy for his attitude. If he could be assured of a hundred years, he would certainly work "with hand and heart" at some "exceptionally noble cause"

(1060-1070). His belief in such a cause is questioned by the hint of irony, when he says there would be time "to try experiment at ease," and when he contrasts the "sudden marvel" which he would then erect with the otherwise "slow and sober uprising all around" of the building (1072-1078; *my italics*). His comment that there will be "full time to mend as well as mar" (1074) also suggests that the critic was right earlier to accuse him of being afraid to choose one cause, for fear of losing his good name. Finally, this third justification, that there is not time for experiment, ends merely in a flippant gesture, quite different in tone from the rest of the passage:

Well, and what is there to be sad about?
The world's the world, life's life, and nothing else.
(1085-1086)

It is a reduction of his position to a facile platitude, making stronger the sense of his scepticism, and anticipating the gambling gesture in the conclusion, as if he can no longer maintain the strain of careful argument.

His last two justifications for not fulfilling his promises expose an increased degree of scepticism. His fourth argument is to imply that one of the "higher sort" (1088) who believes ill can be made good or ugliness made beautiful is simply being fanciful. He concedes that they find sufficient success to justify hope; but they also experience "failure enough . . . /To bid ambition keep the whole from change, /As their best service" (1098-1100). All change, he says, inevitably leads to the same chequered mixture of black and white which forms the present state

of things (1094-1098); this, when taken to its conclusion, is an argument for total inaction.

His fifth justification is really a subsidiary of the first, separating the needs of the body from those of the soul. The Prince professes to value idealism, but typically his expression modifies his approval. In pointing out that "Hans Slouch" would refuse The Critique of Pure Reason as a substitute for meat (1109-1111), he appeals to common sense, but the humour is boorish and reminds the reader of the Prince's earlier philistinism towards nature poets. Common sense also prompts that Kant never intended that his Critique could or should serve as such a substitute. Idealism, the Prince says, functions best when hindered, and ignorance and stupidity form a necessary opposition. Comparing idealists to a river, he says they crash, after moving smoothly for a while, on the rocks of "ignorance, /Stupidity, hate, envy," but then

Up [they] mount in minute mist,
And bridge the chasm that crushed [their] quietude,
A spirit-rainbow, earthborn jewelry
Outsparkling the insipid firmament
Blue above Terni and its orange-trees. (1141-1145)

It is an attractive image, but this ethereal beauty has little to do with social change. The idealists' torrent has been transformed into a pleasing "spirit-rainbow," but "minute mist" has none of the force of the "royalest of rivers" which they were before the "chasm" (1136), and "earthborn jewelry" is merely ornamental. The firmament may be "insipid," but it is the stage of social action, as the Prince has repeatedly pointed out; and a man who frequently employs scientific references to

support his attitudes could reasonably be expected to have reservations about being "King o' the castle in the air" (1108), as he terms Kant. Also, in the context of his previous obsession with balance and order, he could hardly be expected to want his quietude "crushed" or to be fretted into "foam and noise" (1140). His consciousness that he may have conveyed these impressions is apparent when he immediately interjects "Do not mistake me!" (1146). But once he has acknowledged the "rights" of idealists, he simply continues with two rhetorical questions which are equally ironic.³⁵

The first part of the poem, the formal dramatic monologue, then concludes with a reference to the Laocoön sculpture. The Prince uses this figure to characterize what appears to be somnolent inertia as constant and ardent strain (1183-1198), with the clear implication that the same interpretation applies to himself. The metaphor is viable enough, but it is carefully chosen to exploit the public's insensitive and uninformed judgement of art objects in the Prince's favour.³⁶

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau is not intent on the kind of wilful deception which Sludge and Guido attempt. His deceit is more to mask a natural scepticism than to defend gross fraud or murder. His arguments are spurious rather than sophistical. The defence of his policies is not ruined by erroneous logic, but it exploits images and examples which imply the emotional anxiety and ambivalent beliefs underlying his apology. This revelation does not mean he is necessarily to be judged harshly; rather, it increases the understanding of his predicament, which helps to mitigate whatever condemnation his sceptical attitude to idealism might

elicit. Such a conflict between sympathy and judgement is, of course, a characteristic of the dramatic monologue form.³⁷

iii

In the second part, the Prince employs a different technique, reporting in the third person various arguments between the Head of Hohenstiel-Schwangau (the country) and Sagacity, the spokesman for expediency and popular opinion. In the opening section, of about 150 lines, the narrator describes the Head's policies, which are the same principles of non-interference and preservation of order embraced by the Prince in part one of the poem. There is also the same scepticism about the possibility for human goodness. The Head, the narrator reports, recognized that "weakness, wickedness will be, /And therefore should be" (1317-1318), that even the most perfect man would break "into some poisonous ore," thus compensating, in what might be called moral ecology, "Man's Adversary" for excluding him (1318-1329). The ore-smelting image is reminiscent of the industrial and scientific metaphors employed by the Prince earlier. Evidently, in the role of narrator, the Prince has not relinquished his character and point of view, and he manipulates the reader's approval for the Head, who supposedly (it is never explicit) represents what he "might have been" (1224, 2085). The Head, the narrator says, "chose truth" and rejected swift action to apprehend those servants of the people who falsely plotted against him. He preferred to acquiesce in the Creator's plan, "leaving little minds their liberty /Of

"littleness" (1290-1291). The Head is characterized by the narrator as a man of patience and integrity, and as long as the reader is dependent on the information given, this opinion cannot be disputed.

The Head eventually appeals to the people for the power to do their will. It is to be their choice, he says (1400-1401), although he also will choose if the means they allow him "be adequate /To the end and aim" (1403-1404)--a convenient method of leaving the responsibility for his proposal with them, while he retains control over its content and purpose. Passing the dilemma of choice to the people is consistent with the previous arguments for avoiding choices about specific action; these arguments are inevitably hidden, in both parts of the poem, by a mask of practical scepticism about the success of all human endeavour, particularly endeavour for moral good.

The Head is approved in his request and proceeds to demonstrate a new dimension of the Prince's character: the ability to act decisively when required. In the first monologue, the Prince argues a policy of preservation and explains his failure to fulfil his political (and youthful) promises: a defence of inaction. To this point in the second part, the narrator has favourably presented the Head's forbearance towards his enemies: again a defence of inaction. Now, however, the Head, in punishing all wanton deceivers and tricksters (1419-1435), represents the Prince's capability for successful action. When Sagacity attempts to complain that he adhered to the letter of the law, so that by not destroying villainy in its embryonic state he perpetrated thrice the necessary slaughter (1456-1474), the Head maintains that he preserved

truth, implying that he might have harmed good as well as evil with more hasty vengeance (1476-1484). The narrator then more carefully explains the Head's character in terms of this new development.

The Head ruled twenty years with one main principle: "govern for the many first, /The poor mean multitude, all mouths and eyes" (1491-1492). His purpose was to maintain the order and unity of society, to narrow "the gulf /Yawning so terribly 'twixt mind and mind" (1496-1497), to "Equalize things a little!" (1501); and he pursued his task, certain that "he was in the hand of God" (1511). All this is in accord with the Prince's monologue, but the important revelation follows. This man, who was so "timid" about harming the "order" of humanity, so afraid to imperil any good in the depths of things "for a problematic cure /Of grievance on the surface" (1516-1517), will act without hesitation when confronted with real evil:

This same man, so irresolute before,
Show him a true excrescence to cut sheer,
A devil's-graft on God's foundation-stock,
Then--no complaint of indecision more! (1519-1522)

As further proof of his resolute intention, the narrator offers the example of the Italian affair. Sagacity argues to leave things as they are, to "keep Rome manacled /Hand and foot" (1549-1550), but the Head does not listen, and excises "the canker"--"Out it came, /Root and branch" (1560-1565). When Sagacity complains that he did not try persuasion through public opinion--"The great mind knows the power of gentleness, /Only tries force because persuasion fails" (1574-1575)--the Head retorts that the only result after twenty years would be "your own fool-face waiting for

the sight," since "knaves" work while "fools" wait (1589-1594). His scepticism here is of a healthy, practical kind; as the narrator points out, "the war came which he knew must be" (1597).

Concentrating on two issues--the fighting in Italy and the choice of a successor--the remainder of the second part further reinforces the Head's character as a man of decision and integrity, a man with staunch and high, yet practical and realistic, principles, a man particularly who is antipathetic to all deceit and false dealing. The country, Hohenstiel-Schwangau, had once fought for its own liberty and life and had fought well, but from this time the people had also gained a love of fighting "for fighting's sake," so that what was once a glory became a "plague," and the "champion-armour" now masked marauding (1598-1617). Within this tradition, the country nourished the lie that "War is best, /Peace is worst; peace we only tolerate /As needful preparation for new war" (1631-1633). To deal with this situation, Sagacity advises an exploitation of the people's selfishness, prolonging peace "artfully, as if intent /On ending peace as soon as possible" (1652-1653); and the narrator says that since "devil's-doctrine . . . was judged God's law," it would have "seemed a venial fault at most," if the Head had agreed with Sagacity (1646-1649). But the Head prefers truth and will not deceive his people:

While I have rule,
Understand!--war for war's sake, war for sake
O' the good war gets you as war's sole excuse,
Is damnable and damned shall be. (1739-1742)

He admonishes them for seeking an illusory glory and expresses a contempt

for their foolishness (1769-1771) similar to the Prince's earlier attitude to democratic processes (927-935). Whereas the Prince's expression implied an insincerity in his claim to idealism, the Head's purpose here is more strictly rhetorical. He openly derides his people's intelligence in order to assert his own wisdom, which he wishes to enforce onto them:

See! you accept such one wise man, myself:
 Wise or less wise, still I operate
 From my own stock of wisdom. . . .
 You, I aspire to make my better self
 And truly the Great Nation. (1804-1818)

This aim to make his people an extension of his personality and identity differs from the Prince's concern with an interdependence between himself and society in the first part, and it measures the different kind of self-deception the Prince is effecting with his third person narration. A man such as the Head, who is secure in his beliefs and firm in his decisions, need not bother unduly about external circumstances, or about social approval. Certain of his purposes, he imposes his will on his surroundings, since his capacity for action is exactly co-ordinated with his inner impulses and principles. His identity is the direct expression of his will and neither need submit to political expediency. Hence, he confidently announces the necessity of fighting for one cause, for "truth and right . . . on the absolute scale of God" (1862-1870). Continuing his opposition to deceit, he urges his people to "endure no lie which needs [their] heart /And hand to push it out of mankind's path" (1871-1872), since "man's life lasts only twenty years" (1875; man's short life is now an argument for action; earlier it justified the Prince's

failure to act on one specific policy). Austria's rule over Italy is "such a lie, before both man and God," and therefore they should free Italy, "for Austria's sake the first, /Italy's next, and [their] sake last of all" (1876-1880).

In declaiming "war for the hate of war, /Not love, this once!" (1906-1907), the Head is asserting a noble and unselfish principle for fighting, but his proposal still exploits his nation's desire to fight, similar to Sagacity's advice to exploit its selfishness, even though he replaces ignoble reasons with worthy ones.³⁸ If this observation momentarily detracts from the total idealism of his argument, it does not harm the main importance of the Head's behaviour--the assertion of his independent will. In the wider context of the poem, this achievement is of particular significance, since it is what the Prince finally cannot do. The narrator goes on to state that the Head "was resolute /No trepidation . . . should imperil from its poise /The base o' the world" (1910-1919), which, by restating the Head's basic desire to preserve order, maintains a consistency with the first part of the poem. Nevertheless, the narrator also describes the value of the Head's character: in him, "will and power concurred, /O' the fittest man to rule" (1921-1922).

The fact that the Head was chosen by the nation is proof, says the narrator, that "the world had gained a point" (1920), and in rejecting the temptation to found a dynasty, the Head rejects the "pernicious fancy that the son and heir /Receives the genius from the sire" (1955-1956). The Head's reference to the succession of an Italian priesthood by assassination also urges the naturalness of uncertain change:

Depend on it, the change and the surprise
 Are part o' the plan: 't is we wish steadiness;
 Nature prefers a motion by unrest,
 Advancement through this force which jostles that. (2027-2030)

The Prince has earlier expressed a similar notion, that change is accompanied "by unrest" (324-354). However, the Head's attitude towards the idea is different: in part one, the Prince gave the impression of preferring calm, of being afraid of the confusion in upheaval, but here, the Head accepts the fact, and recognizes that the desire for "steadiness" is a personal wish. This differing attitude is again an aspect of the Head's confidence; a man who is sure of his ability and purpose need not fear disquietude or conflict. The Head also goes on to ridicule the authority of "pillow-luck," pointing out that it is impossible to determine which son belongs to which father from an observation of the lives of his "crowned acquaintance"--"there's nothing so unproveable /As who is who, what son of what a sire" (2051-2057). There is a hint here of the question of identity again. Identity is not bestowed by birth, it must be established, proven by the expression, perhaps even the imposition, of will; a head of state cannot be given his name gratuitously, he must earn it, so that "will and power" concur in "the fittest man to rule."

As he wakes, in the conclusion, Hohenstiel-Schwangau makes explicit the theme of identity: "'Who's who?' was aptly asked, /Since certainly I am not I!" (2078-2079). He has, of course, been indulging in a diversity of roles which demonstrate his protean quality of mind: the educated intellectual, the witty sophisticate, the judicial and dispassionate self-apologist, the objective social observer, his critics, Sagacity, the Head,

and the self-flattering figures of the Sphynx, Atlas and Laocoön. The histrionic nature of his monologue is also reinforced by several theatrical metaphors: exile and Leicester Square are "rehearsed, /Tried on again like cast clothes" (2076-2077);³⁹ the Prince's critic demands "performance," since "solid earth" is the "stage" (880-881); man's apprenticeship is frequently curtailed, forcing him to "shuffle" through his "part" as best as he can "on the stage" (1008-1011); the Head allows plotters to "play the part" given to them in the Creator's "scheme" (1298-1300); and the narrator emphasizes the dropping of "masks," when the deceivers are exposed by the Head (1417). Amid the numerous voices and dramatic devices, the Prince's character becomes uncertain, but not non-existent. Uncertainty is at the centre of his personality, and he reiterates in the conclusion the most important area of uncertainty for him--his relationship with the external world.

As a politician, it is his duty to notice the demands of practical circumstances, but therein lies the dilemma, as has been already suggested. The Prince faces the conflict between the external requirements of his public role and his personal impulses. "Inside the soul," he says, argument is easy. There, the "interlocuters" subordinate "claims from without that take too high a tone"--claims made by God, man and a prince's "dignity"--and render these claims insignificant beside the intimate fact that he himself, his personality, is "first to be considered" (2091-2104). This "one intimatest fact" was hinted at in the two parts of his reverie, and here he recognizes it openly. Unfortunately, when "forced to speak," he continues, "one stoops to say" what one's aim

"should have been." Motives which sufficed in the darkness (and silence) of the soul, are inadequate when brought into the light by language, and "one lies oneself /Even in the stating that one's end was truth" (2124-2125). To harmonize the antiphonal claims of inner self and public identity means, for the Prince, to exercise his powers of deception.

In the conclusion, the Prince also takes up the last line of his reverie ("meanwhile use the allotted minute . . .") as "the clue /[He] fain would find the end of" (2081-2082). This comment points to the specific purpose in his reverie, to his decision about the letter, "whose grim seal, /Set all these fancies floating for an hour" (2152-2153). It also points to his sense of limited time, which accumulates in the poem from his repeated references to the twenty years which constitute both the time of his rule and man's average life (474, 811, 1069, 1490, 1589, 1875, 2154). This apprehension that there may only remain "the allotted minute" clarifies the relevance of the section on succession and accounts in part for his fear of change in part one. It also leads directly to his final impasse, where he relinquishes the effort to make a reasoned decision, remaining content with his achievement in the last twenty years:

Twenty years are good gain, come what come will!
Double or quits! The letter goes! Or stays? (2154-2155)

The Prince may not finally be deceived about his selfish motives, but his awareness about his continuing powers is more problematic. The concluding paradox, that despite his acuity he is carelessly flippant about his

decision, climaxes the ironic discrepancy--apparent particularly in the more revealing first part--between a lofty seriousness and a somewhat commonplace frivolity. For all his intellectual ability--his knowledge extends, albeit superficially, to mythology, art, government, mathematics, geology, agriculture, medicine and industry--and his protean agility of mind--indicated by his multiple role playing--he does not finally substantiate his identity. His will can no longer sustain the conflict, which he recognizes. His awareness mitigates criticism, and his final ineffectuality, in view of his potential, is both tragic and comic. This last point has been anticipated by C. H. Herford, who refers to Browning's apologies as "tragi-comedies of principle, in which the whole action lies in the efforts of a self-reviewing mind to get its own life into the compass of a formula too narrow or too wide."⁴⁰ Despite its limitations, particularly about the second half of the poem, Herford's article is also interesting for its tentative movement towards the personality and identity tension.

iv

The prince is a confessed self-apologist. He realizes that an honest confession can be disarming and ingratiating, and that it enables the listener to understand and sympathize, but to judge inadequately when carefully controlled by a self-conscious speaker. He attempts to posit a third view to facilitate judgement, but that view too is controlled by him. His artifice is chosen to support his attitudes; this he knows

and acknowledges. His understanding continues to the recognition that all verbalized attitudes are lies, because of the artifice inherent in all language. Consequently, his very perception is a cause of his inability to act decisively, which effects another of the ironies in his character. The poem is an exercise in deception which finally admits that since all is deception and therefore enigmatic, with uncertain reality, the exercise itself is one of futility and an argument for inertia. If all verbal expression is a lie, and if all attempts at social improvement ultimately produce no change, as the Prince argued in part one, then any chosen action would be wrong or at least vain. The Prince may be able to balance polarities, as he claims, but he cannot finally separate them when necessary. This predicament, in the context of his passion for order and stability, produces the supreme irony that he does achieve the desired equilibrium in his own personality, but of a kind which amounts to an inept stasis. The only apparent means of escape is through chance.

Philip Drew cites the difficulty of judging the persona as a serious flaw in the poem:

. . . if Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau were read by someone who had no notion that Napoleon III was glanced at it would be very puzzling indeed, for nothing is provided against which to check the Prince's arguments. This has to be supplied by the reader from his knowledge of Napoleon III's career.⁴¹

Drew elsewhere says that

even the advantage of a large historical perspective is not really decisive . . . it does not, for example, enable us to detect a consistent direction of ironic attack in the whole of the poem.⁴²

There is, however, a consistent, if subtle, irony between the Prince's embellishment of his worth through such comparisons as the Sphynx, Atlas, Laocoön and Homer, and his scepticism which frequently questions his sincerity. This irony is less obtrusive in part two because of the third person narration, and because of the Head's confident will. There are also several other ironies which emerge with the conclusion, and which have been outlined above. The limited judgement of the persona, however, is central to the poem's meaning, and the political arguments are to be understood in terms of the persona's characteristics.

The Laocoön reference at the end of part one is an appropriate image for the poem's structure as well as for the Prince's immediate argument. He asks his listener to consider the statue with all accessories covered, leaving "only Laocoön /With neither sons nor serpents to denote /The purpose of his gesture" (1187-1189). This limited exposure leaves the statue open to ambiguous interpretation. An imaginative, sensitive person could understand the statue's meaning--its struggle with some unseen obstacle--while a less acute observer might call it "a yawn /Of sheer fatigue subsiding to repose" (1196-1197). The value of the interpretations, of course, is weighted in favour of the more heroic and less trivial. The poem presents a similarly incomplete look at the Prince, and with a similar ambiguity. The Prince's stand hovers between a sustaining of forces and a yawn, with the Prince intending to convince his auditor that the first is the more perceptive judgement.

When only one point of view is given by a highly conscious man, it is difficult to fault that view without further information. Because the

first part is a dramatic monologue in the more conventional sense, the Prince's expression can be seen to imply underlying biases. As a result, the reader may observe that his political policies are the product of personal needs, of his craving for an independent, confident, demonstrable will. The Prince develops a philosophy of expedient preservation because that enables him to fuse identity and personality. Whether or not the opportunism conforms to the social realities is superficially a political concern in his reverie; it is more fundamentally a problem in perception and psychology. The second part, because it is apparently more objective, is even more difficult to judge, except as the Prince intends. This section gives the impression of an external account which considers more seriously his political activities, but the deception is simply more devious, for he still firmly governs the point of view. The poem dramatizes a political figure who can defend himself, but only as long as he is willing to deceive himself, to exploit a mask of language.⁴³ Even his final honesty ambiguously gains him favour at the same time that it condemns him: an acknowledged lie is more acceptable than a blind or dishonest denial of falsehood.

In presenting the two forms of argument, the poem presents two ways in which the persona views itself--each deception producing a different kind of illusion. In the first part, the Prince predominantly defends a policy of inaction, effecting the illusion of a ruler who feeds the poor and promotes the co-existence of diverse ideologies. In the second part, he describes a policy of action, creating the image of a ruler who acts according to high principles. The two share a common concern for

social stability. The second does not contradict the first, since the specific actions which are described there are not denied by the more general argument of the first. On the other hand, they may shed doubt on each other. When the Head rejects Sagacity's advice to deceive the people and puts the truth about their attitude to war before them, is he opposing the Prince's earlier argument that idealism (truth) functions best when diluted with its opposite, falsehood? Or is the fact that the Head's attitude to war finally supports his people's disposition (to fight), even if for more noble motives, the element of opportunism which dilutes truth sufficiently to make it effective? The crucial difference is a matter of personality. The Head is a man of firm resolve and decision; he is secure in the expression of his personality through the identity required of him by his social role. The Prince in part one is more interested in co-operation, in the interdependence between society and himself, where the satisfactory expression of his personality is dependent on the social requirements conforming to that personality. The Head is what the Prince "might have been" if he had overcome the insecurity of his personality. The reverie dramatizes the conflict between personal idealism and practical politics which the Prince, at the conclusion of the poem, is unable to resolve rationally and convincingly.

To approach the poem as an exercise in self-deception, then, is to perceive a structural unity rooted in character. Knowledge of Napoleon III may certainly add another level of irony, but the poem is intelligible within its own boundaries. As well as the deficiencies in irony and structure, Drew also says Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau lacks

either "a narrative line" or "a progressive revelation of the true character of the speaker."⁴⁴ There is, though, a revelation of the Prince's ambivalence and insecurity in the course of the poem, particularly in part one. It is not perhaps as "progressive" as might be desirable, and the argument tends to be repetitive; but the repetitions, again, while dissatisfying, even at times exasperating, are due to the persona. They expose his obsessions and are important, in view of the differing techniques in parts one and two, for emphasizing the common source of all sections.

In disagreeing with Drew's unfavourable criticism of the poem, this discussion may help to explain Browning's own satisfaction with it, which most critics have subsequently dismissed.⁴⁵ If, however, the poem is still not as exciting as others by Browning, then that also is the result of the persona or of the poem's realism, since part of the Prince's deception is to seem quietly objective and self-possessed. Perhaps an arch-conservative is prosaic and dull by definition. Nevertheless, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau provides a fine example for Morse Peckham's description of a dramatic monologue: "the heart of the dramatic monologue is that the reader perceives the speaker as actor, self-conceived, self-defined, and self-deceived."⁴⁶

NOTES

¹Edward Dowden, Robert Browning (London: Dent, 1904), p. 298.

²Robert Browning, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (1871), 1.2155, in The Works of Robert Browning, ed. F. G. Kenyon, VII (1912; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 158. All quotations from Browning's poems used in this dissertation are from this edition; future references will be documented internally by line numbers. For the distinction between identity and personality used in this dissertation, see Introduction, p. 7.

³Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 292; Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 169.

⁴Drew, p. 301; see also pp. 295-297.

⁵King, p. 169; King is here quoting what Gide said of Wordsworth and "The Lost Leader."

⁶King, p. 169.

⁷See Jos. King, "On Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," Browning Society Papers, 2 (1889), 349-362.

⁸Drew, p. 302.

⁹Park Honan, Browning's Characters (New Haven, 1961), p. 5.

¹⁰Honan, pp. 202-203, 220.

¹¹Dowden, p. 298.

¹²William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 150. See also n.26, below.

¹³Drew, p. 295.

¹⁴Letters of Robert Browning, ed. T. L. Hood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 143. Hereafter cited as Hood.

¹⁵Hood, p. 152.

¹⁶W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 363.

¹⁷The change in states of consciousness is even more marked in the first edition, with the break occurring at the foot of a page (p. 142).

¹⁸The inability of some early critics to perceive exactly this aspect of the poem perhaps testifies to the effectiveness of the Prince's illusion. R. M. Spence seems to have first pointed out that the poem presents the Prince's "supposed dream" in Notes and Queries, 8th ser., XII (1897), 225-226, 374-375. Both Jos. King (pp. 349-362) and Edward Berdoo, in The Browning Cyclopaedia (London: Allen, 1897), p. 366, imply that the meeting in Leicester Square actually took place.

¹⁹Sordello, 589-591; The Ring and the Book, X, 373-375; Parleying "With Charles Avison," 219.

²⁰George M. Ridenour, "Browning's Music Poems," PMLA (1963), rpt. in Browning's Mind and Art, ed. Clarence Tracy (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 180.

²¹Philip Drew recognizes this when he says "the entire poem is, as it were, [the Prince's] own creation" (p. 298); Drew does not develop the implications of this in terms of the poem's total effect.

²²Honan, p. 155; see also C. N. Wenger, "The Masquerade in Browning's Dramatic Monologue," College English, 3 (Dec. 1941), 228.

²³Drew, p. 298. Drew is the only critic to have noticed the Prince's authority in the poem.

²⁴Cf., for instance, Fifine at the Fair: "The histrionic truth is in the natural lie" (1492); and The Ring and the Book: "... falsehood would have done the work of truth. / ... Art may tell a truth / Obliquely ..." (XII, 857-860).

²⁵Drew, pp. 295-299.

²⁶Cf. Drew: In the first part, the Prince "has made out a reasonable case for conservative measures in difficult times, and I can detect no trace of casuistry, except in the passages to which I have drawn attention where the tone suggests that possibly the Prince's belief in liberal institutions is more a matter of politic profession than of genuine enthusiasm" (p. 295). Many critics have said the Prince is a casuist: see C. H. Herford, Robert Browning (London: Blackwood, 1905), p. 195; J. Fotheringham, Robert Browning, 3rd edition (London: Marshall, 1898), p. 46; Wenger, p. 231; Raymond, p. 150; F. Mary Wilson, A Primer on Browning (London: Macmillan, 1891), p. 166. Others have been non-committal: Mrs. Orr simply describes the poem as "a defence of the doctrine of expediency," in A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 6th ed. (London: Bell, 1892), p. 161; and Edward Berdoo says it "deals with the subjective

processes which Browning supposed animated Napoleon III" (p. 360). Donald Smalley suggests a more subtle understanding in his examination of Browning's poems of special pleading; he quotes one passage to show that "what may at first seem mere casuistry on the part of the Prince is actually in its implications an effective description of Browning's method of working" ("Special Pleading in the Laboratory," in Browning's Essay on Chatterton [1948], rpt. in The Browning Critics, eds. Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker [University of Kentucky Press, 1965], p. 214).

²⁷Harold Rosenberg, "Character Change and the Drama," in The Tradition of the New (1959), rpt. in Perspectives on Drama, eds. J. L. Calderwood and H. E. Toliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 324-336. See Introduction, p. 7.

²⁸Rosenberg, p. 331.

²⁹His grandiose description of

--the thunder-glow from pole to pole
Abolishing a blissful moment-space,
Great cloud alike and small cloud in one fire-- (593-595)

implies the strong emotional appeal which such reconciliation has for him.

³⁰Alba H. Warren, in English Poetic Theory 1825-1865 (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1950), lists sincerity as one of the key terms among the fundamental concepts of post-romantic poetic theory (p. 6).

³¹For a summary of the utilitarian attack on poetry in the early nineteenth century, see Lionel Stevenson, "The Key Poem of the Victorian Age," in Essays in American and English Literature Presented to Bruce Robert McElderry, Jr., eds. M. F. Schulz, W. D. Templeman and C. R. Metzger (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1967), pp. 260-289.

³²See Honan, p. 264.

³³Philip Drew finds the first hint of disingenuousness in the poem in lines 1151-1162 (Drew, p. 294).

³⁴Drew makes both these points (pp. 293-294).

³⁵For the irony in this passage (1151-1162), see Drew, p. 294.

³⁶See also, p. 56.

³⁷See Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: Random House, 1957), chapter II.

³⁸Cf. also the choice between complying with the nation by fighting and snubbing the nation by seeking peace, with which a critic confronts the Prince in part one (787-793).

³⁹Many critics seem to miss the implications of these lines and place the revelation that all was a dream in the final paragraph. Philip Drew perpetuates this view: "we learn first that the whole of the second half of the poem is . . . an exercise in fantasy. . . . In the last dozen lines of the poem the Prince reveals that the whole scene has been a reverie" (p. 268). It should, however, be clear at this point from the acting metaphors that Hohenstiel-Schwangau had only been indulging in imaginative play. "Exile, Leicester-square" in the poem's context must include "the bud-mouthed arbitress," and the first part of the reverie, not just the Thiers-Hugo episode.

⁴⁰C. H. Herford, "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," Browning Society Papers, 2 (1886), 134-135.

⁴¹Drew, p. 299.

⁴²Drew, p. 298.

⁴³For a discussion of language as a mask in Browning's poetry, see Morse Peckham, "Personality and the Mask of Knowledge," in Victorian Revolutionaries (New York: Braziller, 1970), pp. 84-129.

⁴⁴Drew, p. 302.

⁴⁵Browning wrote to Isabella Blagden, on October 1, 1871, that the poem was what he could not "help thinking a sample of [his] very best work"; Dearest Isa, ed. E. C. McAleer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 367. Typical of the reaction against the poem is H. C. Duffin's estimate, in Amphibian (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), that it "has not virtue enough to sustain its ponderous bulk, and occupies the lowest place among its author's productions" (pp. 167-168).

⁴⁶Peckham, p. 117.

CHAPTER TWO

FIFINE AT THE FAIR: HISTRIONIC TRUTH AND THE FLAUNTING OF ARTIFICE

i

After the predominantly dry, politic language of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Fifine at the Fair is lively and vigorous. Whereas the Prince's weariness was reflected in his vain attempts at a prosaic security, and whereas his verbosity reflected his sense that he should continue his apology because it was never quite successful, the speaker's prolixity in Fifine at the Fair is the expression not only of the complexity of his thought, but of the intensity and energy with which he pursues the myriad images and intellectual distinctions flooding his mind. "In subject, Fifine is a continuation of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, a further exploration of the problem of being. . . . The poem seeks some abiding truth amid the dissolving fragments of the external world; specifically, the speaker gropes for reality of self and, by extension, for the reality of a changeless order beyond time."¹ The speaker, or Don Juan, as it is convenient to call him,² is presented by Browning in the act of organizing his thoughts and perceptions, his view of himself and of his surroundings. As a monologist, he is again an actor, "self-conceived, self-defined, and self-deceived."³

The degree to which Juan deceives himself and Elvire, his wife, has caused considerable dissension among critics. Most have recognized

that judgement of Juan is no simple matter, and the consensus has been that there is a mixture of truth and falsehood in his arguments.⁴ What in the poem informs the reader of Juan's casuistry is even more problematic, with the reasons for harsh judgement ranging from moral outrage at his return to Fifine (the most emphasized reason) to his interference with God's plan of progress.⁵ The most elaborate reason for judging him adversely is presented by Charlotte Watkins, who says the reader may recognize Juan's culpability through his "perverse development of the symbolic language of the prologue."⁶ Unfortunately, her thesis is severely flawed by over-emphasis on an allegorical interpretation of the prologue, and her view has been appropriately criticized by J. L. Kendall and Philip Drew.⁷

The attitude to the persona which the poem elicits in the reader is ambivalent. Any simple or preconceived decision is circumvented,⁸ which, according to Roma King, Browning achieves by "emphasizing the metaphysical rather than the physical, the psychological rather than the moral."⁹ But the poem is as much about sensuous experience as it is about spiritual or mental experience. With few exceptions, Juan's arguments are more difficult to fault even than the Prince's. The Prince, for example, unwittingly exhibits his philistinism by using the notion that beauty lies in the beholder to deride poets; Juan uses the same notion to explain the function of the soul's perception and to describe man's place in the universe, quite without malice or detriment to his intention. Also, unlike the Prince who defends his own theories and actions, Juan moves more often into general theory which applies to all

men and which directs attention away from his specific situation.

To a minor degree, this diversion is an artifice designed to deceive Elvire by steering her away from her personal complaint, by convincing her that his arguments are sincere because they are true to the whole human situation. Also, much of the poem's tension is created by its dramatic circumstances, where a man who is obviously fond of sensual enjoyment defends his indulgence in terms of idealistic definitions of the soul's experience; the value of Juan's discourse is continually threatened by the facetious nature of this initial purpose. But this irony is different from the ironic discrepancy between the grandiose and the trivial in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, which exposed the Prince's scepticism, for Juan is openly a sceptic and the Fifine incident is a specific manifestation of a psychological and philosophical problem already in his mind when the poem commences.

Two of the major incidents used by Juan to explain his argument, his dream and his swim, occur prior to the monologue in time. The dream in particular is important. As Philip Drew has pointed out, it provides a basis for the entire poem:

It is Don Juan's dream (Sections 93-125) which, as it were, lays down the conditions of the debate. In the poem it comes very late, but it is antecedent to the monologue in point of time. It is a dream about the transience of all earthly institutions and hence the relativism of all standards. . . . It is the implications of this dream which Don Juan discusses. . . . [He] is trying in the poem to satisfy what he calls 'My hunger both to be and know the thing I am.' (103) To do this he searches for various sources of certainty, in a kind of fevered fear of emptiness.¹⁰

Significantly, his quest for identity is characterized by a reliance on

his own resources; for him, as for Coleridge in "Dejection: An Ode," the world has no intrinsic worth and all value rests within the soul which perceives it, and which, through the act of perception, gives it life and substance:

. . . in the seeing soul, all worth lies, I assert,--
 And nought i' the world, which, save for soul that sees, inert
 Was, is, and would be ever,--stuff for transmuting,--null
 And void until man's breath evoke the beautiful . . .
 (LV, 824-827)

Both King and Drew describe perceptively the manner in which Juan searches for some source of absolute truth, and for verification of his existence, and they demonstrate how this search structures the poem. But they, and other critics, regard only peripherally one crucial element in the persona's hypothesizing, the matter of perception itself. It is in this respect that the swimming metaphor is of consequence. Juan uses it to illustrate the necessity for man to endure falsehood while gaining brief glimpses of truth, yet it is also symbolic of man's ability to experience multiple planes of reality, since in the poem falsehood is associated, at least superficially, with the fleshly senses and truth with the realm of the soul.

Essentially, as Clyde Ryals suggests, Juan explores a dualistic philosophy,¹¹ attempting to resolve the centuries-old antipathy between flesh and spirit; it is in terms of this dualism that the prologue, "Amphibian," has significance. The notion that man is an amphibious creature has a long tradition. Browning, however, dramatizes a character who contemplates and exercises his dualistic nature without reference to revealed

truth, without any predetermined belief in the reality of either flesh or spirit, with only the knowledge of his own personal experience. The boldness of the poem may certainly be said to lie, as Drew states, "in Browning's initial assumption that it is possible that nothing whatsoever is outside the flux of time and in his willingness to examine the consequences of this for the nature of man."¹² Through the process of organizing his thoughts, Juan gives verbal testimony to the two modes of perception defined by him, and the poem is as much an exercise in the subtleties of human perception as it is a quest for identity.

The ironic contradiction which frequently obtrudes between Juan's postulated belief in the soul's experience and his obvious delight in physical activity is an irony caused by the contrast between two realms of reality. His predicament is a sincere one, and he constructs a complex maze of language to cope with it. Any summary would be unjust, but the following account attempts to abstract one line of thought in an effort to describe his problem. Uncertain of absolute values, he must defend sensory experience since life and human existence depend on it. Yet sensuous fulfilment is transitory and without permanent worth; therefore, he considers another level of experience which, when combined with the flesh, both proves his existence and bestows value on it. The dilemma is in relating the two experiential realms, as well as in defining and demonstrating their reality, and it is heightened by the process, the inexorable flux, which characterizes all human, physical existence. Because finite experience is an ever-changing affair, any proof of value, or any interpenetration of flesh and spirit requires constant renewal, repeated

consummation. To surrender himself either to the deceptive fluctuations of the flesh or to the permanent infinity promised by the spirit is to deny one area of reality and experience, and consequently Juan struggles against Elvire's demands for domestic and lawful restriction to one woman. Yet Elvire is as necessary to him as Fifine, and the two women embody the polarities in his personality: "Together the two represent the necessary tension between spirit and sense, law and lawlessness, restraint and freedom, death and life--Elvire and Fifine."¹³

Juan naturally faces great difficulty in defining his soul's world. It is a realm of perception not subject to physical limitations, and its intangibility requires explanation by analogy. One of the reasons he recounts his dream is to avoid the disadvantages of rational discourse; a sound mind "Keeps thoughts apart from facts" (1528) in a dichotomy which too readily implies a similar schism between the senses and the soul. Flesh and spirit share an uneasy coexistence in him. Their reconciliation is but a momentary affair, achieved by "the excepted eye, at the rare season, for /The happy moment," and dependent on a paradoxical relationship between truth and falsehood:

"Truth inside, and outside, truth also; and between
Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.
The individual soul works through the shows of sense,
(Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)
Up to an outer soul as individual too." (CXXIV, 2182-2186)

Juan is able to glimpse truth and permanence, but he cannot sustain the vision and must descend, as he confesses, "to mere commonplace old facts" (CXXVI, 2229). His final oscillation between Elvire and Fifine is but a

continuation of the conflict between the polarized realms of perception to which he has testified throughout his discussion. Resolution of the tension is at best a paradox and both areas of experience are subject to deception--the flesh because it has only superficial reality and the soul because it is subject to the will and imagination of the individual.¹⁴ The soul's experience cannot be proved ("Soul finds no triumph, here, to register like Sense"; CXXVIII, 2259) except by faith ("'tis faith alone means ripe /I' the soul which runs its round"; CXXIX, 2283-2284), and Juan's vision and understanding of himself and his surroundings is, in accord with his amphibious nature, equivocal. His perception is ambivalent, with the possibility only of some tenuous relationship between the contrasting factions.

Emphasis on the subject of perception should not, of course, detract from a larger interest in the persona's characteristics, since the poem is a dramatic monologue with its unity founded in character. Unlike Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Juan is secure in his distinctions of value among qualitative matters, and his language abounds in descriptive expressions representative of quality rather than crude quantity or bare utility. He continually evinces a fine discrimination and an aesthetic sensibility which is devoid neither of feeling nor sincerity. Sensitive to surface qualities, as he is to inner essences, he is adept at making subtle distinctions between levels of reality. He is a man of refined sensibility and intellect, and these qualities assure an interest in his discussion which might otherwise be absent. His highly wrought consciousness informs his perception at all levels and invests his inner conflict with an

anxiety the more intense because the more fully apprehended.

It is also entirely characteristic of Browning to give such an important debate to a persona who appears superficially dissolute, for the incongruity which occurs between what he does and what he says, between his identity as a libertine and his personality as an intelligent and sensitive individual, heightens the drama of the poem. The manner in which his outward facetiousness and wanton behaviour mask an internal depth of intellect and seriousness dramatically embodies the thematic concern with truth which is obscured by deception. The problem of deception in Fifine at the Fair is a problem with numerous implications for human endeavour: it questions man's modes of perception, his ability to apprehend truth, and the nature of reality. And yet, conversely, the recognition that deception is ubiquitous in human existence can lead to an understanding of the kind of truth available to man, both in art and in life. Through the conscious flaunting of artifice, Juan formulates the "histrionic truth."

ii

Fifine at the Fair is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. Announced respectively as "Amphibian" and "The Householder," they are not necessarily the voice of either Juan or Browning. However, they are linked thematically and imagistically to the central poem,¹⁵ and consequently they function as reflecting areas which mirror certain aspects of the poem, anticipating themes in the first instance and forming an

obliquely ironic comment in the second. Preceding the Prologue, there is also an epigraph, where Donna Elvira scorns her husband's inept defence of himself and urges him to arm himself "with noble impudence." Donna Elvira's challenge immediately introduces the possibility of a feigned protestation of unchanging love that establishes one theme of the poem. The Prologue then posits the concepts of multiple planes of reality, of varying degrees of perception and of imagined perception.

The speaker in the Prologue recounts a "fancy which turned a fear." He observes a butterfly--an overt and traditional symbol of Psyche--and considers their respective existences in separate dimensions, with death awaiting whoever attempts to join the other:

I shall never join its flight,
For, nought buoys flesh in air.
If it touch the sea--good night!
Death sure and swift waits there.

Since he "undoubtedly" rejoices in the insect's flight, he wonders about its feelings towards him. But their presence in different realms and their different states of consciousness mean they cannot communicate; knowledge of the butterfly's attitude is not available ("Who can tell?"). In wondering next what some specific soul, looking down at him from heaven, might think of his swimming, he expresses the complacency of one who substitutes swimming for flying:

By passion and thought upborne,
One smiles to oneself--"They fare
Scarce better, they need not scorn
Our sea, who live in the air!"

Finally, the sea becomes a metaphor for poetry, which is also a "substitute" for heaven, and this medium offers sport to the flesh which "a finer element /Affords the spirit-sort." Nevertheless, the realms in which the poet and the spirit exist are distinct, and the poet's perception of the "spirit-sort" is clearly limited to assumptions, to the imagination and seeming:

Whatever they are, we seem:
 Imagine the thing they know;
 All deeds they do, we dream;
 Can heaven be else but so?

To swim in poetry is to imitate the soul in flight, to imagine the soul's experience in its freedom from "worldly noise and dust." But there is always land in sight and escape is inevitably partial.¹⁶ The poet or swimmer is always restricted, despite his apparent ease of movement in the imagined or alien realm, to bodily capabilities; man is tied to the flesh. Hence, the fancy turns a fear. The poet, in recognizing the limitations inherent in his feigned flight, fears the reaction of the soul who observes his mimicry of her flight:

Does she look, pity, wonder
 At one who mimics flight,
 Swims--heaven above, sea under,
 Yet always earth in sight?

Man, as an amphibious creature, is able to "sport" in two domains, body and spirit, through his imaginative faculties, and this divided experience is described and defined by the analogy of swimming. But his experience of the spirit's realm is a simulation--art is an artifice--and man is

deceived by the illusions which are created by the artifices of his imagination.

As J. L. Kendall maintains, "the speaker does not have complete confidence in poetic inspiration. . . . His 'fancy' has suggested that the truth known to the spirit . . . and the vision which buoys up the poet may be as different as air and water, the one wholly inaccessible to the swimmer-poet, the other fatal to the winged spirit. . . ." ¹⁷ The Prologue anticipates Juan's preoccupation with his dualism, as well as the swimming metaphor which he elaborates in order to conceptualize its nature. In the Prologue, Browning also raises doubts about the reliability of man's perception, about man's ability to discover the truth concerning all aspects of human knowledge.

iii

The main poem intertwines three streams of movement: Juan's and Elvire's walk through Pornic; the debate which Juan has with Elvire about Fifine; and Juan's metaphysical speculation about the nature of reality and human experience. Juan constantly uses the tangible scene where he walks for analogies and metaphors or to convey mood, and these images embellish his more abstract processes of thought. Two earlier experiences, his swim and his dream, intrude on his mind also. He mixes their impressions with the scene around him, so that the physical, external sea merges with his remembered and imaginatively recreated experience of it, and the culmination of his walk at the Druid monument coincides with the

climactic mental image of his dream--also the monument. This complex interplay of present experience and past memory promotes the conflict between intuition and concept which characterizes the poem, and if the three levels of movement are kept in mind, the poem's structure is more readily followed.

Don Juan's delight in his physical surroundings is apparent early in the poem as he expresses his enthusiasm for the sudden appearance of the gypsies and their fair. But never content with the enjoyment of surfaces, he considers also the mysteries and paradoxes which their behaviour supplies. Three images of transformation, for example, express his recognition of the emergence of beauty or gaiety where none seemed possible: the fair grew from "mere bit of hoarding . . . as brisk as butterfly from grub" (V, 8); "squalid girls" are "transformed to gamesome boys" (III, 26); and the caravan itself burst from a bud into the "queen-tulip of the Fair!" (V, 34). He also observes the deception on which the gypsies depend, as they hide their "treasure" in order not to stale its appeal "Before the time is ripe" (III, 18), as the women alter their physique with tricot or padding (III, 24), and as their master this year parades a six-legged sheep which last year was "the Twin-headed Babe, and Human Nondescript!" (XI, 125).

The gypsies are indifferent to the social disapproval of their cheating. Since they have no respect for repute or good fame, their inversion of socially accepted values poses a mystery: "How comes it, all we hold so dear they count so cheap?" (X, 103). They apparently know a secret which is outside normal moral censure, and Juan's sympathy for

the truant's delight in what to the law-abiding seems a degraded existence is contained in the irony of his mild travesty of public disapprobation: amidst an "inclement" sky and "brute" companionship, these "misguided" ones, who spurned a "sweet and civilized" ministration, and who are left with a "self-sought wretchedness," send up "frank" laughter (VII, 63-72).

Juan, of course, has already expressed his desire for freedom, in his response to the pennon which flew "Frenetic to be free" (V, 38). He resents being "at the beck" of society, but beside his inability to give up society his restlessness presents a paradox, which is similarly posed by both the flag and the gypsies. As Roma King suggests, the pennon "attains its 'frenetic' life precisely because it is anchored. . . . It becomes an appropriate image for the speaker, who realizes in the process of his meditation that what he wants is the experience of being, caught between earth and sky, quivering with life, frenetically stretching for home while he remains firmly anchored to earth."¹⁸ This incomplete or circumscribed freedom is in accord with the speaker in the prologue and similarly with the gypsies--"They, of the wild, require some touch of us the tame" (VIII, 80). The anomaly in freedom is physical survival, "Since clothing, meat and drink, mean money all the same" (VIII, 81). Juan refers to other such clandestine activities by birds who "furtively" take "tax and toll" from mankind to strengthen their nests, and concludes with the puzzle: "the how and why of which, /That is the secret, there the mystery that stings!" (IX, 97-98). Juan may ask analytical, intellectual questions about paradoxical circumstances, but they nevertheless carry an emotional impact ("stings"). He is clearly bothered by the question, and

soon returns to it--"Now, what is it? . . . heartens so this losel that he spurns /All we so prize?" (XIII, 139-140). He is fascinated by the idea that they might have some knowledge ("compensating joy"), however esoteric ("unknown and infinite"), which he lacks.

Fifine herself culminates this opening speculation and questioning, since she epitomizes what is most alluring in the lawless being of her people: she is "self-sustainment made morality" (XVI, 175). She also contains certain ambiguities. Juan elaborates in a lyrical manner, too enthusiastic for Elvire's satisfaction, her exotic beauty, her "Greek-nymph nose" and "Hebrew pair" of eyes (XV, 153); but dressed as a boy she has an ambiguous sexuality and she is also, he says, a "Sexless and bloodless sprite" (XVI, 173). She poses "half-frank, half-fierce" (XV, 168), and "though mischievous and mean," she is "Yet free and flower-like too, with loveliness for law" (XVI, 174). Her very being is her source of morality; it is a natural sense, not imposed or artificial, and lies beyond the comprehension of public judgement.¹⁹ Juan may describe her sexual ambiguity and her meanness as well as her loveliness partly for Elvire's benefit, but partly too because he is conscious of a danger in her provocative enticement. She evokes not merely the dangerous excitement inherent in what is illicit; she also arouses the more subtle, tantalizing mixture of enchantment and fear which is promised by unknown and unconventional experiences.

This quality is developed in the image of the lily, which immediately follows (XVII). The lily, through a "deliriously-drugged scent," entices insects into her "golden gloom" where they die, marking "her

wealth" and manifesting "her pride." The lily, too, acts outside the bounds of conventional judgement, and the fault, Juan implies, is in the deceived rather than the deceiver ("is she in fault . . .?"). He assumes a superior wisdom, which perceives both the beauty and the danger, and which is therefore able to admire at a distance (XVIII, 188-189). Yet there is a sufficient touch of irony in his comment to deny any complacency or self-righteousness on his part, and to suggest that his distinctions are in some small degree designed for Elvire's peace of mind:

"Discreet we peer and praise, put rich things to right use," and a rose, not some "flavorous venom'd bell," is placed "I' the proper loyal throne" (XVIII, 189-193; my italics). He says he loves Elvire, not Fifine, but while Fifine is a "poison-plague," his implied comparison of the two women renders the safe Elvire somewhat anaemic; she is one of the "simpler sweets," a "daisy meek, or maiden violet" (XVIII, 194-197).

The facetious element in this doubtful compliment to Elvire does not, however, belie Juan's feeling for her. Rather it serves to illustrate how his moral ambiguity is rooted deeply in a genuine emotional conflict. Fifine and Elvire appeal to him in quite opposite ways, and in terms of different realities. His development of the pageant of traditional female beauty, in response to Elvire's request that he explain why Fifine makes his thoughts sure of their meaning (XIX, 199), serves to explain further this schism. In one sense the artifice of the pageant masks reality, as Juan says it did for Louis Onze, screening the grave from him (XIX, 203), but in Juan's use of its imaginative possibilities it also clarifies reality, the reality of his sincerity towards both

women, and the reality of his bifurcated vision. Sustained for twenty-one sections (XIX-XXXIX), the pageant is a device which enables him to begin his exploration of different levels of perception.

His delight in fleshly surfaces is again quickly apparent, manifested particularly in his description of Cleopatra: "each orb of indolent ripe health, /Captured, just where it finds a fellow-orb as fine /I' the body" (XX, 219-221). There is also the same mixture of allure and threat in Helen and Cleopatra, which was in Fifine, and as Fifine concludes the file of beauties with "smile and pout, /Submissive-mutinous" (XXI, 251-252), her ambiguous attraction is maintained. Juan is, of course, conscious of his attention to sensual detail and of its effect on Elvire. In these sections, his casual banter with her and his easy sophistication mark his skilled handling of her responses. He is able to acknowledge yet suspend her protest: "O I know, Elvire! Be patient, more remain!" (XX, 227); "This time, enough's a feast, not one more form, Elvire! /Provided you allow . . ." (XXI, 246-247); "do not flout!" (XXI, 250). And he atones for his indulgence by placing her with her peers in the parade, where she will "prove best of beauty there!" (XXIII, 260). This flattery, conveniently, soothes Elvire's vexation just as he presents Fifine with a franc, and to allay further Elvire's reaction, he mocks his own apparent generosity by assuming a "seigneur-like" posture which ironically echoes the droit du seigneur of more notorious times. This act leads him to satirize caustically the pride and condescension of "quality," of "dames, whom destiny /Keeps uncontaminate from stigma of the styne /[Fifine] wallows in!" (XXIV, 276-278). He scorns those who

scorn Fifine in her unfortunate predicament, but the hostility he rightly directs at their self-righteous insensitivity in part masks a certain jealousy which he displays as he watches Fifine report to her master with the money. The intensity of his dislike for her "lord" is clear in his harsh description of the man ("--Brute-beast-face,--ravage, scar, scowl and malignancy"; XXV, 288), who is "no doubt, her husband," and as he continues he cannot conceal his acerbity: "Oh, she prefers sheer strength to ineffective grace, /Breeding and culture! seeks the essential in the case! /. . . Ay, they go in together!" (XXV, 292-298).

The complex irony in Fifine's seeking "the essential" is particularly revealing. As an intellectual dilettante seeking sensual pleasure, and success in seduction, Juan is outdone and frustrated, because, if Fifine does look for strength, then in terms of the flesh she is seeking the "essential." As a cultured intellectual, however, Juan is aware that the attractions of the flesh are transitory and that the "essential" is infinitely more refined than "sheer strength." In this sense, Fifine does not seek what is "essential," and therein lies her limitation, which is intellectual, not physical. Idle dalliance with Fifine may compensate for the dull passivity of Elvire, but Fifine will be equally dissatisfying, for the opposite reason. This brief phrase thus becomes an example of the manner in which Browning embodies Juan's dilemma. Its strong emotional tone implies Juan's yearning for Fifine's bewitchment, while its ironic or intellectual meaning simultaneously evinces his awareness of her limitations. Through this moment of intense irony, Browning has built into the persona's language the fundamental ambivalence

which forms the underlying drama of the whole poem.

Juan relaxes and resumes his explanation of the pageant, now making distinctions between the phantoms in his fancy and the reality nearby. When Elvire joined the line of beauties, she gave up her "clog /Of flesh" (XXIV, 257-258), and Juan develops his perception of two Elvires to enable Elvire to judge herself more easily. The two female phantoms, though "mere illusion . . . dream-figures," are to be judged "without fear /Or favour" by Juan and Elvire, "the true" (XXVI, 298-301). A common enough exercise of the imagination, allowing an individual to make a detached self-appraisal, this artifice also enables Juan to illustrate different levels of truth. After further flattering Elvire by an implied comparison with Helen (XXVII, 303-326), and after further playful teasing by ascribing cosmic significance to her emotions (XXVIII, 326-329), he arrives at his first announcement of the deception in surfaces. He will demonstrate that Elvire was mistaken in thinking he regarded the flesh unduly, by proving "That, through the outward sign, the inward grace allures, /And sparks from heaven transpierce earth's coarsest covertures" (XXVIII, 336-337).

All creatures, he says, have "supreme worth" in some way (XXIX, 339-341). He believes that "quick sense" is able to perceive the "self-vindicating flash" in each man and woman, thereby proving that each detail of the plan, "in place allotted it, was prime and perfect" (XXIX, 351-355). Self-vindication is in accord with Fifine's "self-sustainment" (XVI, 175), and is an aspect of Juan's keen interest in self-reliance and self-fulfilment. The qualifying phrase, "in place allotted it," is

significant for his asseveration of value in all things, since his ability to discriminate is inextricably involved with his recognition of value. Each person has an essential and unique value, yet the kind and degree of value is always to be determined.

Fifine's value, Juan claims, is that she makes no demands on a man, except that he admire her appearance (XXXII, 398-411). Presenting a fascinating understanding of female types, with wittily ironic parodies of their pride and arrogance, Juan imagines how Fifine would state her demands in comparison with those made by other women, including his wife (XXXII, 412-507). Helen desires to be worshipped, Cleopatra to satisfy uniquely men's senses, the Saint to preserve her virgin innocence, and Elvire to keep her man. By presenting Elvire's speech as if in Fifine's words, Juan tactfully removes the characterization from himself, but it nonetheless embodies his view of his wife, and makes an important contribution towards explaining the struggle between them which pervades the poem. When Juan was uncertain of Elvire's affection, he was completely attentive to her, but now, by implication, the roles are reversed; Elvire is uncertain of his affection. Consequently, her morality is as much rooted in her depth of instinctive, emotional being as his is. Fifine's oxymoronic description of her "sad smiles and gay tears" (XXXIII, 466) measures her insecurity, and Elvire emphasizes the permanence of her feelings, the core of her argument against Juan's behaviour: "'The soul retains, nay, boasts old treasure multiplied'" (XXXIII, 472). She may pinpoint a crucial element in Juan's philosophical quest:

"'Preposterous thought! to find no value fixed in things,
 'To covet all you see, hear, dream of, till fate brings
 'About that, what you want, you gain; then follows change.'"
 (XXXIII, 496-498)

But the strength of the derision which she directs at Fifine ("'"putridity that's phosphorescent'"'; XXXIII, 504)²⁰ suggests the mixture of hurt pride and jealousy which motivates her strictures:

"'In short [Juan] prefers to me--chaste, temperate, serene--
 'What sputters green and blue, this fizgig called Fifine!'"
 (XXXIII, 506-507)

This is quite a different point from the one that he sees no "value fixed in things," and implies Elvire's self-deception. By making a virtue of her consistency and by attacking his fickleness, she obscures the fact that her morality is just as self-interested as Juan's. She "emerges both a lonely woman and a voracious female."²¹ Juan, by acknowledging Fifine's appeal to him, attempts to be honest in a way in which Elvire is not (or he cannot imagine her to be), and his exasperation with her emerges in his disgruntled indictment of woman's inability to "comprehend mental analysis" (XXXIV, 508-511). The accusation is not simply masculine arrogance. While his response to her unwillingness to acquiesce in his affair with Fifine is unjust and works against him, it also represents the seriousness with which he regards his explanation of separate perceptible realities.

He defends his fickleness in terms of his discrimination of value. He may struggle feverishly to own a Raphael, and then "saunter past with unaverted eyes" once it is obtained (XXXV, 549), but to accuse him of a

"change" in his appreciation of the picture is to "misappropriate sensations" (XXXVI, 557). Before he obtains his desire, man's anxious doubt about his success, his "fret and fume," is obvious to all, but because this disappears once he has his wish, it does not follow that he no longer values the object. "One chamber must not coop /Man's life in" (XXXV, 547-548),²² and there will intrude other "novel hopes and fears, of fashion just as new /To correspond i' the scale" (XXXVI, 562-563; my italics)--always there is a careful discrimination. Even though he may be distracted by Doré's pictures, he would always save his Raphael in case of fire. The point, of course, is that depth of value is to be divorced from superficial sensation.

A description of Elvire culminates the pageant and establishes the nature of her value for her husband. She stands "pure" in "pale constraint," "Inviolatè of life and worldliness and sin" (XXXVIII, 588); there is a slow, languid quality about her appearance; her clothes protectively mask her virginal beauty, and despite her "rebellious" breasts the whole effect is one of statuesque calm (XXXVIII, 598-608). The calm contains a hint of lifelessness--the dress is a "pall," though it moulds "sleep not death" (XXXVIII, 603-604)--and Elvire is quite antithetical to Fifine's tantalizing and provocative challenge. Juan is nevertheless sincere in his admiration of her: she "makes right and whole once more /All that was half itself without" her (XXXIX, 610-611). Elvire, however, is astonished at his description, since her mirror reflects "'a tall, thin, pale, deep-eyed /Personage'" (XL, 624-625), and she has apparently forgotten Juan's separation of the two Elvires: "I want you,

there, to make you, here, confess you wage /Successful warfare, pique those proud ones" (XXXVIII, 581-582). For an analogy to explain his vision and levels of perception further, he turns, the first of many times, to aesthetic experience.

Art is important to Juan, since its very nature is involved with metaphorical realities or concrete glimpses of some normally hidden beauty. His use of Biblical symbolism to express an aesthetic experience --"that burst of pillared cloud by day /And pillared fire by night" (XLII, 639-640)--is symptomatic of his belief in art as "knowing, seeing, feeling the absolute truth of things /For truth's sake" (XLIV, 686-687). Juan is anxious to discover the essence in things, what he calls "the prime, the individual type," and art provides one means for penetrating the Shelleyan veil of appearances to perceive this essence. Each individual may also achieve such penetration through love. There is a gross discrepancy between the features of each unique soul--no two souls are similar (XLIII, 655-656)--and its outside form, the flesh, which invariably proves an inadequate representation. However, every face may provide for some other person "a spark of soul /Which, quickened by love's breath, may yet pervade the whole /. . . and, free again, be fire" (XLIII, 675-676). As the artist may produce a masterpiece by "Retrenchment and addition" (XLVII, 716), each lover may "amend his love" (LI, 751), and produce "Result more beautiful than beauty's self" (LI, 754). Through the transforming power of "hand-practice" in art or "soul-proficiency" in love (L, 736-737), reality may be perceived in its inherent perfection. This phenomenon is further explained by Juan's Michelangelo sculpture.

The Master's hand hewed "life out of death" from the marble, but to the world it is "death still" (LII, 762), since it requires imaginative insight to recognize its worth or life. It embodies, for Juan, Michelangelo's conception of Eidotheé. She has no physical reality and cannot be seen "in earth, in air, /In wave," but she is "manifest i' the soul's domain," and so can be perceived "through aid /O' the soul!" (LII, 788-791). If the statue is judged with the senses only, "without soul's help," it has little merit, which enabled Juan to buy it for ten dollars (LII, 793-801).

The soul's perception, which at this stage (LII, 789-791) seems to mean simply imaginative insight, is central to Juan's mental stance; it is a means of ordering and evaluating existence, and yet it records an enigmatic reality. Art, he has said, is his evidence "That something was, is, might be; but no more thing itself, /Than flame is fuel" (XLI, 629-630). Fire in the poem comes to symbolize essence, and its flickering, continually altering, yet permanent, if ineffable, form, is the perfect image for the indeterminate quality which constitutes essence or "type." It is the "Self-vindicating flash" (XXIX, 352) which may be elicited from each man and woman, the "elemental flame" (LV, 829) which may be drawn out by the soul's transmuting power. Hence, Juan's description of the phantom Elvire in the pageant is his soul's view of her, his personal perception of her essence (LIII, 802-808).

In the next sections (LIV-LIX), he proceeds to emphasize the dependence of essence, of value and beauty, on the "breath" which evokes it, the individual "seeing soul." The world is "inert" until man evokes

its beauty (LV, 824-829). Juan also emphasizes the importance of the evocatory process itself, not only because it is the source of value in the external world, but because the soul's gain--"What each soul for itself conquered from out things here" (LV, 823)--will, he believes, define its own character after death as well as in life. He sees no purpose in the soul's striving with the world "unless the fruit of victories /Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own /For ever" (LV, 819-821). Revealing man's fundamental impulse to believe in the permanence of his unique identity, Juan finds support for his belief in the soul's power to transform. It does not matter where the "flame" springs from, whether from "gums and spice" or "straw and rottenness"--these images refer back to Elvire's taunt that he "hankers even /After putridity" (XXXIII, 503-504)--as long as the "soul has power to make them burn" (LV, 829-831). He gathers heart from "just such conquests of the soul" (LVI, 840), through transferring all that is "achieved in visible things" into a realm of the "soul's imaginings" (LVI, 844-845). This process amounts to the soul's creation of itself through interaction with the external world, and once created, it is reluctant to contemplate its own demise. The concern with self dominates Juan's discourse: gain "would not be /Except a special soul had gained it" (LVIII, 872-873). In asserting this belief, that gain must always belong "To who performed the feat," he acknowledges the assistance of God's grace as well as of man's will (LVIII, 876). "God's grace," however, is out of place in this context and the emphasis is rather on "man's will." Indeed, Juan's use of soul implies nothing more spiritual than imagination or mind, and the soul's

experience is defined in aesthetic rather than religious terms. Acknowledgment, for example, of some previous source of an idea is to an artist, rather than to any divinity. Juan admires the scholar who remains loyal to his Master (an artist), who proclaims himself as his Master's product ("His work am I!"; LVI, 853), and who attempts to imitate His work, thereby hoping to "vindicate" his Maker (LVI, 858); the Miltonic and Popean echoes again indicate Juan's secular rendering of religious conceptions.²³

In section LIX, one of his most spiritual episodes, he anticipates the joy and intensity of love "Hereafter," when each soul will yearn to share its gain with the gain, "all diverse and yet in worth the same" (LIX, 885), of some other soul. He anticipates a realm of spiritual and fruitful coexistence, even of Neoplatonic fusion--"lose the varicolor in achromatic white!" (LIX, 897)--with a soul or "lodestar," "An other than itself" (LIX, 902). The unity he contemplates, however, is sufficiently far in the future, sufficiently enigmatic and speculative (the lodestar cannot be defined--"God, man, or both together mixed"--and the whole concept is "guessed at"; LIX, 908), to enable him to emphasize still the soul's independence and responsibility to itself: "each soul lives, longs and works /For itself, by itself" (LIX, 900-901).

Juan, in view of his keen desire to discover some evidence of permanent, eternal existence, is not disposed to speculation, preferring to rely on known experiences, whether of the senses or of the mind, and as a spiritual conception the passage is generally unconvincing. He cannot demonstrate an unequivocal belief in this future union with Elvire--he can

only ask, "why doubt a time succeeds /When . . . both share /The chemic secret . . .?" (LIX, 888-890)--and the whole notion seems as much a gesture as his obeisance to "God's grace" (LVIII, 876). Also, in contrasting his "self-indulgence" with Elvire's "self-sacrifice" (LIX, 891-894), he pinpoints the crucial difference in their moral attitudes. Later, he develops this difference between hedonistic and altruistic impulses into male and female principles. At this moment, however, his underlying hedonism is satirized by Elvire, who accuses him of abdicating, despite his contrary assertions, the "soul's empire" for the "rule of sense" (LX, 913-915). Before he reaches Fifine's soul, "some flesh may be to pass!" (LX, 930), and that probability, for her, belies his total argument: "Who is it you deceive-- /Yourself or me or God, with all this make-believe?" (LX, 940-941). In having referred to the pageant of women as "dream-figures," as "the false" (XXVI, 301-302), and to the "soul's imaginings" (LVI, 845), Juan has in a sense agreed already that he is exploiting an illusory and therefore deceiving realm. But, whatever Elvire may think about the specific circumstances, he is certain that his soul's perception has more validity than she is willing to credit. Consequently, he explains further the intricate interrelationships between truth and falsehood.

He refers to art again, this time wishing he could invoke music, as if it were some form of substitute for divine aid: "Ah, Music wouldst thou help!" (LXI, 943). Music, he says, would easily pierce the "False shows of things," which words struggle feebly with, although music does not "dissipate . . . /So much as tricksily elude what words attempt /To

heave away" (LXI, 951-953). Falsehood, it should be noted, is ubiquitous in human existence. Juan also introduces a musical image which affords another fine example of the manner in which Browning builds into Juan's language the multiple levels of perception he is exploring:

For this is just the time,
The place, the mood in you and me, when all things chime,
Clash forth life's common chord, whence, list how there ascend
Harmonics far and faint, till our perception end,--
Reverberated notes whence we construct the scale
Embracing what we know and feel and are! (LXII, 966-970)

This metaphor combines the "mood" or emotional state of the scene with mental knowledge of harmonics as a physical phenomenon, aural perception and linguistic expression. As an analogue for the manner in which a common event in life may yield depths and implications which encompass life's multiplicity, the metaphor represents Browning's artistic practice in the dramatic monologues, and, in this particular poem, Juan's dialectical process. The "clash" of a common chord, the argument between man and woman about another woman, contains within it elements which constitute human experience of all types--intellectual, emotional, ontological--"what we know and feel and are!" The metaphor is also an appropriate analogue for Juan's exercise of sensory and imaginative perception. The chord can be heard, that is experienced through the senses, but the many harmonics are not distinguishable by the human ear, unless removed from the chord's tonal structure and played separately. The harmonics cannot be heard, but they are nevertheless known intellectually, from sound analysis, to be there; also, they include the notes of a musical scale for which the chord would form the tonic (that is, the basic chord

in that particular scale). By analogy, Juan wants to discover, as far as the limits of perception allow, the elements of life's common chord, both those which are physically perceivable and those which are mentally or imaginatively perceivable, and from those elements to construct a metaphysical scale which comprehends the multifaceted nature of human existence. He uses a similar image again in section CXXIV, and such repetition is one of the many ways in which Browning unifies the poem.

An even more significant analogy for Juan's exercise of the senses and penetration of deceit is his swimming metaphor. He likens swimming, the fruitless attempt to rise from water and remain in air, to his "spirit's life / 'Twixt false, whence it would break, and true, where it would bide" (LXV, 1040-1041). The swimmer must learn to work with the grosser, "obstructing" medium he finds himself in, and not fight against it, in order to reach the finer element above which gives him life. Deception characterizes the medium man moves in, and hence he must learn to endure it, or be consumed by it:

We must endure the false, no particle of which
Do we acquaint us with, but up we mount a pitch
Above it, find our head reach truth, while hands explore
The false below: so much while here we bathe,--no more!
(LXV, 1059-1062)

Juan then introduces quite explicitly a point central to his discourse, a statement which emphasizes the crucial significance of his self-awareness:

One truth more true for me than any truth beside--
To-wit, that I am I, who have the power to swim,

The skill to understand the law whereby each limb
 May bear to keep immersed, since, in return, made sure
 That its mere movement lifts head clean through coverture.
 (LXVI, 1064-1068)

It is only through the continued consciousness of his existing, experiencing personality that he verifies the reality of his identity, and his consciousness is inextricably rooted in his ability to perceive. Consequently, since he must perforce live with deception, he should recognize and handle it, "swim" in it, and thereby overcome it:

 the more I gain self-confidence,
 Get proof I know the trick, can float, sink, rise, at will,
 The better I submit to what I have the skill
 To conquer in my turn. . . . (LXVI, 1070-1073)

It is a superb argument for surmounting pleasure by indulging in it, but any facetiousness which might ensue from an application to the Fifine affair adds a delightful comic note rather than detracts from the point's viability. Juan, of course, is too skilful a debater to make any specific application and, despite the ironic layer which threatens to undermine its brilliance, the point nevertheless approaches a paradox of profound consequence for Juan, and implicitly for Browning.

By deceiving, Juan learns to master deception and thence to perceive truth, a paradoxical truth in falsehood. By concentrating on reality, he may transcend it to reach an idealism beyond it and yet included in it. He also develops an extraordinary capacity for handling appearances, which is required of man if he is to penetrate their illusion:

Full well I know the thing I grasp, as if intent
 To hold,--my wandering wave,--will not be grasped at all:
 The solid-seeming grasped, the handful great or small
 Must go to nothing, glide through fingers fast enough;
 But none the less, to treat liquidity as stuff--
 Though failure--certainly succeeds beyond its aim,
 Sends head above, past thing that hands miss, all the same.
 (LXVI, 1082-1088)

The paradox lies in his deliberate exercise of pretense: he pretends to delude himself by treating a liquid as if it were a solid. This act naturally fails, but it nevertheless allows sufficient success to ensure his survival. Truth is obtained through designed and controlled deception, which depends again on his ability to manipulate illusion. A similar facility, with similar results, is required of the artist, which will become more explicit in section LXXXV.²⁴

For the moment, Juan capitalizes on his coup, exploiting his metaphor further as the sea of life, "this wash o' the world, wherein life-long we drift" (LXVII, 1089). Man breathes by seizing "what seems somehow like reality--a soul" (LXVII, 1093); although the illusion is soon discovered, his head "regains /The surface." The soul which aided him is "swallowed up" in the tide and disappears "who knows where," but it goes "gaily," an epithet which anticipates any accusation that it was used and left sorrowing (LXVII, 1099). The important point for Juan is that it fulfilled its function: it confirmed his existence. Again, Juan's words--"I felt it, it felt me" (LXVII, 1101)--have a literal meaning which suggests duplicity, and it would be a cunning artifice indeed which openly flaunted deception in order to deceive. However, the import of any literal meaning is always countered by the skilled sophistication

and metaphorical level of his thought; as he says, he interchanges with Elvire "No ordinary thoughts, but such as evidence /The cultivated mind in both" (LXVIII, 1140-1141). The uneasiness about his sincerity which is effected in the reader is the element of irony which maintains the poetic or dramatic nature of the work, which prevents it from being simply a metaphysical discourse (the usual critical stricture).

Elvire's next objection to Juan is that he seeks aid only from women, which leads him to expatiate on male and female principles. These are essentially a development of the difference between self-gratification and self-sacrifice, which, he has already hinted, characterizes the difference between himself and Elvire (LIX, 891-894). Even if a man is content to follow another's lead, he will still "pilfer" the leader's "light and heat and virtue"; while a satellite caught up in his master's "course," he yet "turns upon himself" (LXXI, 1169-1172). By contrast, "Women rush into you, and there remain absorbed" (LXXI, 1173), or, to express the antithesis more pithily, "Women grow you, while men depend on you at best" (LXXI, 1179), and the two kinds of "creature" require diverse modes to deal with them (LXXV, 1219-1220). The aspiring leader of men should not evince any superiority over them; on the contrary, he should disguise his abilities, "dissimulate the thought /And vulgarize the word" (LXXV, 1226-1227), for men will only follow "One of themselves and not creation's upstart lord!" (LXXV, 1243). On the other hand, with women, truth may replace disguise--one's "best self revealed" (LXXVI, 1254). Even if "the weaker sort" are tempted to exaggerate their claims, at least the lie is to elevate rather than to debase (LXXVI, 1255-1258).

With women, "Be all that's great and good and wise, /August, sublime"
(LXXVII, 1279-1280).

The subtlety of Browning's achievement in these sections (LXIX-LXXX) is remarkable. As Juan moves from a gaily comic parody of the self-debasement required to lead men (LXXVI, 1261-1276), to a superbly vicious attack on man as a horrible putrescence who is moved by envy rather than by love (LXXIX, 1320-1351), his verbal agility and range of rhetorical effect are astonishing. Both the virile humour in his account of the way man must be snared "through letting him imagine he snares you!" (LXXVII, 1286), and the caustic wit which permeates his satirical exposure of masculine pettiness and virulence, are handled with a masterful confidence which ensures the reader's admiration for him. Above all, his flaunting of artifice is as deliberate as ever: when dealing with women, he advises, "Mimic grace, /Not make deformity your mask!" (LXXVI, 1258-1259). Desperately anxious to secure his personal reality, he rides the momentum of his rhetoric to the culmination of this episode, the climactic assertion that women, by disengaging his soul from "the shows of things," prove his existence (LXXX, 1363-1365). They convince him that he is a "truth, though all else seem /And be not"; even if he dreams, at least he knows he dreams (LXXX, 1359). He is established as the centre of his own universe, or "the still point of the turning world," to anticipate the Four Quartets:

The falsity, beside, is fleeting: I can stand
Still, and let truth come back,--your steadying touch of hand
Assists me to remain self-centred, fixed amid
All on the move. (LXXX 1360-1363)

Juan's triumph is real and honest enough, but the perplexity for the reader lies here in Juan's degree of consciousness about several implications of his argument. While Browning elicits admiration for Juan, he subtly undermines him. Juan is seemingly oblivious to the point that each mode of handling men or women is equally a means of manipulating them for his personal advance. He appears oblivious also to the reflexive effect of his scorn for man's impotent love: if man is an egocentric whose "love-apple" is a "stinted crab," then by gender so is Juan. And he ignores particularly the parasitical implications in his relationship with women, which severely modify the previous assertions of his soul's independence. Juan's clear statements of feminine sacrifice--a woman "Takes nothing and gives all" (LXXX, 1355)--suggest he does understand these anomalies in his moral attitude, and speculation might propose that the intensity of his attack on man in section LXXIX partly reflects a furious frustration with his own impotence in being unable to prove his reality without external assistance. He cannot, of course, openly acknowledge these matters, because they would detract from his preoccupation with self-definition. But, whether or not Browning intended to imply Juan's silent recognition of them at this point, it is clear that they indicate a serious result of Juan's discourse: he has reduced love to a means of masculine aggrandizement. This restriction does not deny the intellectual validity of Juan's argument; rather it asserts that selfish pride is an inevitable corollary of his reliance on personal resources for metaphysical inquiry. The opposition is qualitative, based on human value rather than incisive logic. Despite Juan's effort to

conceive everything intellectually, he does, however, finally admit the force of this qualification (CXXVIII), and it remains Browning's severest criticism of his mental stance.

In the meantime, Juan maintains his emphasis on the power of the mind. In explaining his need for more than one woman, he says that proving his reality is a continual process, a life-long task, and consequently there is always more than one "voyage" to be made (LXXXII, 1396-1400). It is the mind, however, which "navigates," which makes all distinctions between fact and fiction (LXXXII, 1414-1417), and which requires constant exercise to avoid becoming effete. "Elvire is true," but is therefore "too safe," providing no challenge for the mind to overcome (LXXXII, 1422-1427); alternatively, Fifine, as a "cockle-shell" beside Elvire's "ship," demands more intricate seamanship, "the true feat" of mind (LXXXII, 1428-1431).

This sustained assertion of the mind's ability to handle deception prepares the reader for the most significant passage in the poem about the interrelationship between falsehood and truth (LXXXV-LXXXVI). Juan explains why he admires drama, "the honest cheating" (LXXXVII, 1517). Dramatic illusion is applauded because it is an acknowledged artifice. This open boast of simulation is "Falsehood's bribe," which wins for Fifine, an actress, the love of those "who hate Falsehood most" (LXXXV, 1478-1482). The crucial point, however, is always to exercise the perceptions, to distinguish between the object and its imitation; otherwise all enjoyment is lost: "Mistake [the actor's] false for true, one minute,--there's an end /Of admiration!" (LXXXV, 1488-1489). Partly based on Aristotle's

observation that man instinctively admires designed imitation, the point leads to the difference between aesthetic experience and real experience: "Truth, we grieve at or rejoice: / 'Tis only falsehood, plain in gesture, look and voice, / That brings the praise desired, since profit comes thereby" (LXXXV, 1489-1491). "Truth," actual experience, demands a committed response; it is not to be admired so much as accepted or acted upon. Discernable falsehood involves the observer's faculties of perception, requiring him to distinguish between the real and the simulated, and consequently allowing him to admire the skill and success of the artifice. However, actual experience may not be "truth," and this exercise of the mind is not some facile, pleasurable act; it also involves a more serious tenet: "The histrionic truth is in the natural lie" (LXXXV, 1492).

This complement of oxymorons constitutes Juan's central paradox, and the central paradox in Browning's art. On one level, it simply means that artistic truth resides in the acknowledgment of its falsehood: an artifice is an artifice. But it also has a more profound meaning, which rests on the opposition between "histrionic" and "natural." "Histrionic truth," the truth contained in art, in consciously designed artifice, is concomitant with the "natural lie," the falsehood which permeates all natural things (natural implies all that is not contrived--man himself and the world of nature he inhabits). Everything, Juan says, "has a false outside, whereby a truth is forced / To issue from within" (LXXXVI, 1505-1506). Art, then, is truthful because it provides an analogue for this paradox. The deceiving element in art provides both its value and its truth, it does this because art parallels reality,

whose value and truth also reside in its deceiving appearances. Artistic truth is not more real or less real than life; it is inextricable from the truth about life. The artifice in one reflects the artifice in the other. Deception characterizes both art and life, requiring careful discrimination for the proper perception of each.

This passage is the climax of Juan's progress to this point. The drama metaphor is not simply abstract speculation; it is appropriate to his aesthetic sensibility and emerges from the inner qualities of his character. It is the focal point for his insistence on the necessity and value of handling deception and on the truth in falsehood. It justifies his interest in artifice, and in Fifine, who demands the exercise of his discriminating faculties. It also explains further the importance of perception, since all he says rests on the reliability of his perceptions, an assumption which underlies his argument throughout. As in art, where success is lost if the false is mistaken for true, so in Juan's whole performance, if he mistakes false for true then the validity and success of his thought is similarly lost. The truth in his discourse, then, lies in his overt flaunting of deception. By implication, this procedure applies also to Browning, and Juan's climactic paradox here characterizes an essential element of Browning's aesthetic theory as much as it does the persona's own performance.²⁵

Sections LXXXVII and LXXXVIII form a plateau in the poem, where Juan explains the impulses which moved him to visit the fair with Elvire

(his admiration for drama) and provoked his exploration of "abstruser themes" (an earlier dream). Also, he believes his discourse so far has been inadequate, and therefore he proposes, like Hohenstiel-Schwangau, to vary his technique. In effect defining a distinction between poetry and prose, he explains this change in terms of the restrictions of rational language. A sound, prosaic mind separates thoughts from facts, and confines its sense to one line of reasoning at a time (LXXXVIII, 1527-1530). This process dichotomizes what is perceived as a whole, and consequently leaves a "residue" of "things unseen" in the mind, which may "stagnate and obstruct /The system" (LXXXVIII, 1526-1527). Juan is clearly aware here of the difficulty in expressing multiple levels of perception within the syntactical limits of logical expression, a difficulty which creates another underlying tension in his exercise of mind. When he is asleep, however, his "dreamings oft exceed /The bound" (LXXXVIII, 1539-1540), releasing another kind of perception-- unconscious as opposed to conscious cogitation. The poet, he says, is not troubled by "intrusive fancies," having the facility to express them freely: "Unchoked, the channel's flush, the fancy's free to spend /Its special self aright in manner, time and place" (LXXXVIII, 1532-1533). Juan, in contrast to poets, will relate his dream in an effort to communicate more satisfactorily his apprehension of "things unseen."²⁶

Perplexed and overwhelmed after a swim by "fancies manifold /. . . memories new and old; /The antenatal prime experience" (LXXXIX, 1559-1561), Juan turned to music for the "Truth that escapes prose" (XC, 1572), invoking the "master of the spell," who "Mad'st moonbeams marble" (XC,

1585)--a striking image for art which renders the insubstantial concrete, the fleeting permanent. He plays Schumann's Carnival, reflects on the "certainty of change," the falsehood to be found in art as in nature (XCIII, 1677-1679), and slips into a dream where Pornic and Schumann merge and are transformed into a Venetian Fair.

The Fair, where a "Concourse immense of men and women" are all masked (XCV, 1691-1692), becomes a symbolic representation of the deception which permeates human existence. The human condition becomes a maze of disguise, where the only known reality is the disguise itself: each person makes "the vizard whence himself should view the world, /And where the world believed himself was manifest" (XCV, 1696-1697). External reality may be classified by "hard and sharp distinctions" between age and youth, but also by "the infinitude /Of passions" which coalesce in the individual mask, or which "man pampers till his mood /Becomes himself" (XCVI, 1713-1715). Repeating his earlier descriptions of the soul's efforts to express itself in fleshly appearances--what amounts to individual effort to fuse personality (psychological "mood") and identity (external characteristics)--Juan says the "classed creature" is

in the main
 A love, a hate, a hope, a fear, each soul a-strain
 Some one way through the flesh--the face, an evidence
 O' the soul at work inside; and, all the more intense,
 So much the more grotesque. (XCVI, 1717-1721)

This reference to the grotesque as an inevitable accompaniment of some intense struggle between flesh and spirit, between different levels of

reality, provides, obviously, an explanation for Browning's evident fascination with such distortions throughout his canon. It is in this distortion that the interpenetration of flesh and spirit is evidenced. Juan goes on, however, to develop another feature of his dream, which is also central to Browning's artistic practice, as it is to Juan's own exercise of perception--point of view.

Juan emphasizes that his vision is a visual emblem only, without sound and therefore without language which depends on the "will of who affords /The banquet" (XCVIII, 1730-1731), the will of the speaker, and moves from his position above the crowd into the middle of them, becoming "A groundling like the rest" (XCIX, 1738). Less able to see the type and more able to see individual monstrosities in his new position (XCIX, 1740-1742), Juan yet discovers that the "brutality" is easier to accept at close range and that his attitude changes from disgust to pity (XCIX, 1747). His closer proximity limits his range of perception and therefore is a means of deception, although, as ever, the deception leads to a more truthful perception. He observes the discrepancy between gesture and speech, "the eye that strove to say /The same thing as the voice" (C, 1758-1759), the daily conflict which characterizes the human condition. But the means of gaining truth is important:

I gained
 Knowledge by notice, not by giving ear,--attained
 To truth by what men seemed, not said: to me one glance
 Was worth whole histories of noisy utterance,
 --At least, to me in dream. (C, 1761-1765)

Juan has already implied that dreaming is akin to artistic vision

(LXXXVIII, 1524-1540), and like Browning's "recording chief-inquisitor" of "How It Strikes A Contemporary" he discovers truth through the observation of common men, now recognized as simulacra who represent each human identity. Juan finds also that propinquity brings acceptance of the "wrong" as well as the "ugliness" in men (C, 1765-1768). Through the strength of his will, he could "observe, or manage to escape, /Or make divergency assume another shape /By shift of point of sight in [him] the observer" (CI, 1771-1773). Hence, he can understand the value of man's propensity to deceive. "Force" and "guile" are necessary weapons for personal survival in "that squeeze with nature, we find-- life" (CI, 1781); they are further justified by the paradoxical interplay of opposites, which is always present in Browning's defence of evil:

Are we not to learn the good of peace through strife,
Of love through hate, and reach knowledge by ignorance?
(CI, 1782-1783)

Comparing his delight in watching the crowd with the elation of a chemist who, by "tracing each effect back to its cause," "Constructs in fancy . . . all diverse life," Juan says he thus gluts his hunger "both to be and know the thing [he is], /By contrast with the thing [he is] not," and "so, through sham /And outside," he arrives "at inmost real" (CIII, 1806-1818). This brief passage explicitly represents Browning's interest in the reality of human personality behind an outward and misleading appearance, examined by means of the dramatic monologue; it also implies Browning's quest for psychological self-knowledge and identity

by exploring other people, or personae, and thereby discovering what he is not in order to know what he is. Fifine at the Fair combines these concerns quite specifically, and containing as it does so much that is central to Browning's work, it is tempting to read the poem as an almost direct expression of Browning himself, and particularly, in view of Juan's aesthetic consciousness, of Browning as conscious poet. Such an inference, however, is speculative, despite the many efforts of biographical critics.²⁷ It is clear, of course, that the poem is as much about poetry as it is about the quest for a permanent identity and for knowledge of self, and that it embodies crucial aspects of Browning's aesthetics.

Juan's dream-vision next undergoes "A formidable change" (CV, 1825), which he evocatively compares with a sunset. His lyrically vivid description of a growing darkness which absorbs and eventually obliterates all light and perceptible distinction seems almost to contain the destruction of all sensory experience (CVI). Mutability, however, is his immediate concern, although the threat which it continually poses to certainty of existence and of perception is never far from his thoughts.

Before his gaze, the square in Venice expands its significance to symbolize first Europe and then the world, and the impact of this transformation causes Juan to realize that the masquerade is permanent in human existence; the Carnival of the world is "the state /Of mankind" (CVIII, 1858-1859). From this knowledge, he says, it is "easy to infer" the meaning of his altered attitude towards the "brute-pageant." He ironically rejects his "pride of place" above the crowd, and contrasts

"such pinnacle'd pre-eminence" with the ground which was "the proper goal for wisdom" (CVIII, 1867). There, he discovered that by holding "the balance" and by doing "justice to the drift /Of nature" (CVIII, 1873-1874), he could explain "the glories by the shames /Mixed up in man, one stuff miscalled by different names" (CVIII, 1874-1875). The important point is to "get close enough!" (CVIII, 1877); then, propinquity leads to understanding of the good in evil, of the paradoxical nature of man. "What is all this," he asks, "except the lesson of a life?" (CVIII, 1878).

It is also the lesson of Browning's monologues. Regarding an over-view of life as presenting a misleading picture of men, Browning preferred to get as close as possible to each individual, to penetrate the depths of each unique soul, believing that the only sure knowledge obtainable is of individuals in individual circumstances. Juan proceeds further:

to get
 Acquaintance with the way o' the world, we must nor fret
 Nor fume, on altitudes of self-sufficiency,
 But bid a frank farewell to what--we think--should be,
 And, with as good a grace, welcome what is--we find.
 (CIX, 1880-1884)

This passage evinces the same interest in realism that characterizes Browning's work. This does not mean, of course, some superficial, easily apparent naturalism, but all the complexity and ambiguity of human reality as it is experienced on earth. In view of life's continuing change, Juan qualifies his conclusion--"Is--for the hour, observe!" (CX, 1885)--which emphasizes his romantic concern with the momentary

truth that is dynamic and elusive. Rejecting the goal of "self-sufficiency" as what idealistically "should be," he struggles to reconcile himself with the enigmatic realities of "what is." This effort entails not so much a new stance in his mental attitude, as a restatement, in symbolic dream terms, of his earlier attempts to illustrate life's indeterminate, ever-changing essence. While he rejects "self-sufficiency," he does not relinquish the importance of his personal point of view, which is quite clear in his emphasis on the difference between looking down at the masquerade from above, and viewing it from within its midst. He is not God looking down, but man observing from within.

All human activity is fraught with vanity, because attended by change; architecture, academies, science, philosophy, history, morality and art are all indicted by Juan (CX-CXVI). Only one voice never failed, which, he says, "the preachment's coign of vantage nothing ailed" (CXIII, 1942), and which is contained in nature, not man-made; but all it can state is that truth is both transient and permanent:

"Truth builds upon the sands,
Though stationed on a rock: and so her work decays;
And so she builds afresh, with like result."
(CXIII, 1944-1946)

The perplexity and disturbing quality in this paradox hardly present any joyful consolation for the endless vicissitudes in which man is caught up, although Juan urges the notion that "some building will be there" (CXIV, 1964), whatever its form. In doing this, however, he moves towards a vision of the total insubstantiality of all essence and reality, towards the utter inability of man to determine or to state anything

without also stating or being conscious of its opposite:

Well, let the blocks prove mist
I' the main enclosure,--church and college, if they list,
Be something for a time, and everything anon,
And anything awhile, as fit is off or on,
Till they grow nothing, soon to re-appear no less
As something,--shape re-shaped, till out of shapelessness
Come shape again as sure! (CXIV, 1957-1963)

This is Hohenstiel-Schwangau's dilemma of mental polarization more fully articulated, and yet ironically the almost nonsensical, cyclic movement of indeterminate abstractions suggests an inability to articulate. Also, the manner in which the disjointed phrasing anticipates the more complete fragmentation and series of contradictions in the opening of Beckett's The Unnamable contains a key to the poem's modernity. Locked within a series of sensory perceptions which revolve inexorably before him, man struggles to grasp some principle which will supply substance enough to sustain his being and to satisfy his ego. Whenever man rejects the pre-existence of absolute values in the universe, he is confronted with this dilemma; a feature of romanticism, it is therefore a modern dilemma.²⁸

Juan acquiesces in the principle that the only certainty is change: "Why, that's stability /Itself, that change on change we sorrowfully saw /Creep o'er the prouder piles!" (CXVII, 1997-1999). As always, he resorts to a flaunting of the paradoxes he discovers facing him in order to perceive the truth they contain. There is never one concept without its opposite:

"So, all is change, in fine," pursued
 The preachment to a pause. When--"All is permanence!"
 Returned a voice. (CXVIII, 2009-2011)

Perhaps aware that his statement sounds too much like a puzzle of his own making, he reminds his listener of his present mode of perception. He is still describing his dream and ought to say he "saw" instead of "thought":

Since ever as, unrolled, the strange scene-picture grew
 Before me, sight flashed first, though mental comment too
 Would follow in a trice, come hobblingly to halt.
 (CXVIII, 2014-2016)

He asserts, then, the reliability of his perception because it is the direct result of, in fact part of, experience (his dream), not some idea contrived from and after the experience. Mental comment follows "in a trice," in virtual simultaneity with "sight," which "flashed first," but then comes "hobblingly to halt." Juan is concerned to avoid any "disequilibrium between the moment of insight, which is certain, and the problematical idea we abstract from it," in a conscious bid to retain the value of his experienced, even if privately experienced, vision.²⁹

Juan returns to his cloud and sunset imagery to aid the recreation of his dream's climax. As darkness at the end of day overwhelms all objects and blackness reconciles all things, so there was an "arrest" of change in the Venetian Square, and the whole scene merged into unity. Again, Juan's vivid description of the enveloping darkness elicits a response from the reader which suggests a more serious and metaphorical meaning of the passage--the very extinction of consciousness. Such an

implication is reinforced by Juan's repeated depiction of the unity as "blank /Severity of peace in death" (CXIX, 2022-2023; CXX, 2036-2037), and the fusion is a resignation ("they sank /Resigned enough") rather than a resolution.

Both Juan's dream and his walk with Elvire end at the Druid monument. In its tomb-like appearance, it also takes on the chilling aspect of death: it contains within its depths "a grim /Bar-sinister" which "ends /All with a cold dread shape" (CXXII, 2055-2057), and it is "the mound" into which his dream subsides (CXXIV, 2164).³⁰ But, of course, it stands for more than simply the common end of all life. It is the enigma which man's learning is unable to comprehend, but which ignorance, though understanding it even less, treats correctly by recoiling instinctively from it (CXXII, 2057-2059). It stands for the permanence which outlasts man's transience; it causes hope and fear, reminding "'us, all the while /We come and go, outside there's Somebody that stays'" (CXXIII, 2080-2081). It represents the limits of man's perception: "there lies /Something . . . that points to mysteries /Above our grasp" (CXXIII, 2102-2104). It contains, too, the crude pagan beliefs which persist among the peasant people, despite Christian efforts to transform the stone's primitive sexual connotations into divine and transcendent love (CXXIII, 2108-2149). Exploiting his complex levels of reporting again, Juan tells, through a peasant's mouth, of some city cynic who suspects that the church's spire is "'just the symbol's self, expressed in slate for rock, /Art's smooth for Nature's rough, new chip from the old block!'" (CXXIII, 2154-2155). This comment implies the

monument's duality--it symbolizes both what is base (physical) and what is refined (spiritual) in man. Since all this is spoken by a peasant, the knowledge is available to the ignorant as well as to the learned, a point which is presumably designed, legitimately, by Juan to add credibility to his story.

This monument effectively constitutes the consummation of Juan's argument. As the climax of his dream, it recreates the insight he is striving for, and its physical presence reinforces that recreation with a convincing tangibility. This fusion of dream image and physical object exhibits his desire to integrate imaginative and sensory perception, and the symbolic layers in the monument itself combine the many opposites and paradoxes which he has exploited: man's duality, his limited perceptions, his contact with permanence. A musical image (CXXIV, 2175-2181), similar to that in section LXII, again supplies a useful analogue for Juan's modes of perception: his discourse, like music, may appear intangible, but it nevertheless has a basis in physical fact. And the image again characterizes the relationship between his fundamental premise or tonic chord ("All's change, but permanence as well") and his total metaphysical position or accompanying harmonics, which comprise the sum of his argument and the insight represented by "those mammoth-stones, piled by the Protoplast /Temple-wise in [his] dream!" (CXXIV, 2165-2166):

"Truth inside, and outside, truth also; and between
Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.
The individual soul works through the shows of sense,
(Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)

With this climactic penetration into the "principle of things," the protagonist overcomes his fear that there may be a horrifying void behind the veils of reality:

What change to dread
When, disengaged at last from every veil, instead
Of type remains the truth? . . .
Something as true as soul is true, though veils between
Prove false and fleet away. (CXXV, 2207-2212)

But these heights of metaphysical confidence cannot be sustained. Through a clever burlesque of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound, which juxtaposes Aeschylean mythology and his irreverent commentary, Juan descends from the metaphorical veil of reality to the physical veil of Fifine (CXXV). As he "disengaged" the former, so he hints naughtily at surreptitious lifting of the latter. The travesty is inevitable, because Juan can never deny his duality, and the struggle to free himself from the baser element will always fail. Like the pennant, he cannot leave the pole to which he is attached, and like the swimmer, he must remain in the water, however far out of it he manages to reach. All new experience ultimately leads back to the same commonplace ground it started from:

The fresh and strange at first,
Soon wears to trite and tame, nor warrants the outburst
Of heart with which we hail those heights, at very brink
Of heaven, whereto one least of lifts would lead, we
think,
But wherefrom quick decline conducts our step, we find,
To homely earth, old facts familiar left behind.
(CXXVI, 2230-2235)

And his awareness of this circular movement provokes a sense of weary
futility, whose aching tiredness ends only with the peace of death:

Awaking so,
 What if we, homeward-bound, all peace and some fatigue,
 Trudge, soberly complete our tramp of near a league,
 Last little mile which makes the circuit just, Elvire?
 We end where we began: that consequence is clear,
 All peace and some fatigue, wherever we were nursed
 To life, we bosom us on death, find last is first
 And thenceforth final too. (CXXVII, 2238-2245)

Juan, subdued by this unpromising thought, is then impressed with "a novel point," the notion that "each lie" has "Redounded to the praise of man" (CXXVIII, 2247-2248). The limitation in his argument is that his exercise of deception was flattering to his pride, and asserted the power of his personal will: "and Truth, unlike the False with Truth's outside, /Neither plumes up [man's] will nor puffs him out with pride" (CXXVIII, 2255-2256). The truth referred to is presumably the knowledge that all life ends with death, a thought uncomplimentary to his ego. Consequently, his whole insight into the nature of reality, of his identity and existence, is again rendered doubtful, even suspiciously like some instinctive assertion of his self-importance. Soul has not triumphed as he has been at pains to suggest; rather it is sense which has provoked his total argument, since the evidence for sensory perception is available on request--with sense "'tis ask and have" (CXXVIII, 2260). Sense, he says, promotes self as the soul's only master:

Such savour in the nose
 Of Sense, would stimulate Soul sweetly, I suppose,
 Soul with its proper itch of instinct, prompting clear
 To recognize soul's self Soul's only master here
 Alike from first to last. (CXXVIII, 2269-2273)

All he has established, he implies, is the power of his own will to

deceive himself into believing he is his own master. It is a natural illusion to effect, since the soul is not only stimulated by the senses in this act, it is also prompted by "its proper itch of instinct." His consciousness of the inevitability of his personal extinction, "time's pressure" and "dark's approach," makes him willing to admit the possibility that he is subject to some "soul" other than himself (CXXVIII, 2273-2280). Man, he says, "receives /And not demands--not first likes faith and then believes" (CXXVIII, 2280-2281). The phrasing is liturgical and the thought is akin to New Testament assertions of God's love which is given freely to men.³¹ Juan does not, however, embrace religious orthodoxy. He does not specify what man "receives"; the other "soul" is not defined (the fullest description would be his earlier references to "God, man, or both together mixed"; LIX, 907; CXXIV, 2188; CXXV, 2210); and the conditional clause (CXXVIII, 2273) restricts his consideration of losing "the rights /Of rule" to the level of possibility. Only the humility induced in him by his sense of futility adds force to his statement's effect.

Brought to recognize his limitations, and the selfishness inherent in his previous philosophy, Juan is willing also to acknowledge the necessity of constancy in love: "Inconstancy means raw, 'tis faith alone means ripe /I' the soul which runs its round" (CXXIX, 2283-2284). He comments ruefully on the absence of self-indulgence in such a principle --"Poor pabulum for pride when the first love is found /Last also!" (CXXIX, 2289-2290)--and says that his means of attaining infinity caused his error. Instead of some endless linear extension, attempting to "Fix

into one Elvire a Fair-ful of Fifines," he should have analysed one spot in depth, that is "From the given point evolve the infinite!" (CXXIX, 2295). This point is the fault in Juan's method, as opposed to the more qualitative flaw of selfishness. It is in accord with Browning's concern with infinity in art, but it is not "the central theme of the poem," as Drew suggests.³² It is what Juan's task ought to have been. Wiser, Juan proposes to give up the "fickle element" to remain with Elvire: "Land-locked, we live and die henceforth: for here's the villa-door" (CXXIX, 2305).

However, as Roma King points out, this statement contains its own contradiction: "'Land-locked' . . . 'die' . . . 'door': these images, surfacing from the depth of his subconscious, are evidence of a tension, a spiritual restlessness, that can never abide the restrictions he affects to accept."³³ Juan has just said, in support of permanency in love, that ending where he began "looks like law, because the natural man /Inclines the other way, feels lordlier free than bound" (CXXIX, 2287-2288). This observation also involves a curious repression of sensual instincts, antithetical to his earlier emphasis on what is (CIX), since to say that whatever restricts man's freedom "looks like law," because it does not pamper man's instincts, because it fails to reinforce his pride, is to turn what "should be" into law instead of "what is." In other words, Juan is now trying to have Elvire satisfy his sensual desires as well as his spiritual impulses. She is to satisfy his whole personality, not just supplement what "was half itself without" her (XXXIX, 611). And since he has to deal with her physically as well

as mentally, the fear that his previous perception of her on the soul's level may have denied her physical substance produces a sudden, desperate cry for proof of her sensuous presence:

Touch me, and so appear alive to all intents!
 Will the saint vanish from the sinner that repents?
 Suppose you are a ghost! A memory, a hope,
 A fear, a conscience! Quick! Give back the hand I grope
 I' the dusk for! (CXXX, 2308-2312)

But Elvire cannot satisfy the urge for excitement and freedom which Juan has defended so eloquently and convincingly, and he implies the lifeless imprisonment which confinement with her would mean. She is "The solid land, the safe" (CXXXI, 2315); as a householder he will be "calm" and "contemplative" (CXXXI, 2332); while "the seasons fleet," he and Elvire will "abide" (CXXXI, 2333); "Enter for good and all," he concludes, "then fate bolt fast the door, /Shut you and me inside, never to wander more!" (CXXXI, 2339-2340). Even when he described earlier his idealized perception of Elvire's beauty, Juan hinted at the death-like overtones to her calm aspect--it seemed "As if [her] vesture's snow were moulding sleep not death" (XXXVIII, 604). The peace and security which she offers him form one side of the warring factions within him, but to accept them alone would mean giving up the torment and flux which is the essence of his being and of life itself. His return to Fifine is an expression "of continued striving rather than stagnation. . . . his final act affirms rather than negates his humanity."³⁴

His final act also restores the equivocation between sense and spirit, which has accompanied his behaviour throughout the poem. He has

continually flaunted the expediencies of deception in order to balance and interrelate the two experiential realms. In the last sections, momentarily disillusioned by the realization that all his endeavour and brilliant handling of artifice lead to only one fatal conclusion, he gives up the struggle and anticipates the peaceful quietude and respectability of a conventional householder, "duly domiciled, /Contributable, good companion of the guild /And mystery of marriage" (CXXXI, 2319-2321). After all, "far from realizing gain, /Each step aside just proves divergency in vain" (CXXIX, 2290-2291). It is a solution which will both bring him calm and avoid the self-centredness which he has so vehemently and bitterly satirized in men. But to retain human existence is to retain sensual experience. Love is permanent in man's life, as symbolized by the Druid stone, but that means physical as well as spiritual love. Both Fífine and Elvire are necessary. Indeed, Juan's total behaviour, linguistic and physical, suggests that all love is the product of man's double level of perception; there is no unifying, transcendental love in his experience, only the notion that a bifurcated love is necessary for the continuing processes which make up his existence. Caught between the conflicting demands of his consciousness, without belief in external absolutes to predetermine a solution, man's personality is insecure within his dualistic nature.

V

The Epilogue's relationship with the poem has always caused critical problems. Most usually its last line is abstracted ("I end with

--Love is all and Death is nought!" quoth She"), which, it is said, shows that true love is finally more powerful than death (or a philandering Juan).³⁵ The line, of course, would then constitute a common Browning aphorism, and it has been quoted to assert Browning's continuing optimism in his later poems.³⁶ But the Epilogue is not so simple as critics often imply.

Entitled "The Householder," these four stanzas in effect satirize the respectable householder, who is here only too eager to give up what is supposed to be bliss. Beside Juan's romanticizing of domestic joy in section CXXXI, the householder is tormented and totally unhappy. His predicament helps to explain Juan's tacit antipathy towards such confinement and the Epilogue reveals household bliss as another illusion. There is the point, of course, that the householder's life is miserable because he is separated from his dead wife, and his keen desire to die himself is partly a desire to rejoin her. Also, her time "up there," without him, was equally unsatisfactory: "'And was I so better off up there?' quoth She." Love is all, then, since it is all that supplies joy to both husband and wife, even after death. It is more than either conventional domestic "comfort" or supposed heavenly reward, and whether this love is earthly or divine is at best ambiguous. The implication that the wife's existence "up there" lacked happiness clearly suggests that she is not "metamorphosed";³⁷ it therefore follows that any assertion of transcendental love is as equivocal in the Epilogue as it is in the poem itself. Love is the means to the satisfactory experience of each person in the Epilogue as it was to Juan in the poem. Despite ugly circumstances and

despite death, love overcomes all, even to the point where the householder prefers death to life.

But there is another aspect to the Epilogue too. The householder's hurried, tumbling language, the grotesque stagnation of his mind--"Dreary, weary with the long day's work: /Head of me, heart of me, stupid as a stone"--his physical discomfort and mental torment--"the neighbour-talk . . . /All the worry of flapping door and echoing roof; and then, /All the fancies"--all imply an extreme desire to cease the agony. "Help and get it over!" he says to his wife in his urgency to surrender earthly existence, and central to the epitaph he composes for himself are the lines "Affliction sore long time he bore . . . /Till God did please to grant him ease." Indeed, there is a grotesquely comic and irreverent gusto to these lines, as the householder in careless glee composes a rough epitaph, only too anxious to conclude the formalities with the utmost celerity. In his haste, he cannot finish and asks his wife to do so. In view, then, of his obvious anxiety to free himself from his decaying circumstances, of his desire for death to ease his "affliction," her reply that "Love is all" becomes ironic.

The whole passage suggests that sensuous experience is at least as significant to man as spiritual love, since the householder is as eager to relinquish his earthly torment as he is to join his spiritual wife. The Epilogue continues the ambivalent perceptual experience of Juan's monologue, and concludes the poem with a fine ambiguity. Clyde Ryals concludes that "permanence comes only when the swimmer is metamorphosed into a butterfly, when 'sense' totally yields to 'soul,' when

the amphibian is transformed into a householder."³⁸ But the householder's existence in the Epilogue is not permanent and quite uninviting; he is still an amphibian. Rather Browning implies, as Roma King says, "that man's devotion can never become single and all-satisfying until he is transplanted from time into eternity. For Browning this event remains a hopeful possibility but, in this poem, nothing more."³⁹ Only in death can man's dual vision be reconciled, only then can he find peace and ease of mind. This point ironically reflects on Juan's reluctance throughout the poem to accept death.

vi

The truth in Don Juan's discourse is contained in his exercise of the imagination; it is a "histrionic truth," to do with acting, creating an illusion, with deceiving. Consequently, it involves a prolonged effort of perception and will on the persona's part. The poem, in turn, forces a similar sustained effort of perception and will on the reader, which is second only to Juan's, or Browning's, and second because the reader follows where Browning leads. This interaction between reader and poem is intrinsic to the poem's point: to manipulate deception is necessary for knowledge of the truth about life, but it is difficult; to maintain a clear perception of that manipulation is also difficult; but both are possible.

Juan's flaunting of artifice means that he attains something of the role of stagemanager, defining his surroundings--the fair, the

gypsies, the sea, sky and landscape--eliciting their meaning to further his argument, and purposely directing Elvire to the Druid monument in order to make its physical presence before her coincide with its metaphorical presence in his dream (CXXI, 2041-2045). Juan's character in this role should, however, be carefully distinguished from that of the Duke in "My Last Duchess," whose similar manipulation and staging of a "show" has been excellently analysed by David Shaw.⁴⁰ Shaw concludes that "the craft of the producer, whose theatrical self fiercely wills the extinction of every other self, becomes a metaphor for the damnation of all self-deceived and egocentric men."⁴¹ Juan is egocentric, but he is not as arrogantly self-deceived as the Duke, and he does not will "the extinction of every other self." Both characters transform the past into a present which supports their self-conceived identity and purpose, both manipulate their companions for their own ends, and both flaunt artifices. But these shared features are shared with any monologist, and in a sense define the dramatic monologue's form.⁴² The important distinction is that Juan's "stage-craft" is consciously exploited, and that his verbal display is the result of a sincere desire to understand the depths of his own experience; it is not the unconscious manifestation of an "obsessional neurosis" as seen in the Duke's brief performance.⁴³

His egocentrism does mean, though, that the world-view he presents is subject to his will and to his perception. The natural world, for example, is not something to be reconciled in some romantic redemption of the mind, but it is there to be valued by men and to be appreciated aesthetically rather than religiously. Nature supplies images, metaphors

for the mind's experience, and is set apart from men. Juan's exercise of will, his emphasis on his unique, separate identity, thus places him among the heroic types of Manfred and Faust, and his awareness of the need for constantly renewed experience links him particularly with Faust:

Ay, in this thought I pledge my faith unswerving,
Here wisdom speaks its final word and true,
None is of freedom or of life deserving
Unless he daily conquers it anew.⁴⁴

Juan, however, never stands alone. Women, he asserts, are necessary to establish his reality, the culmination of his philosophic insight involves working "through the shows of sense" to "an outer soul as individual too" (2184-2186). The limitation in this position is that it involves an endless exploitation of women for his personal needs; it is a limitation which exposes Juan as selfishly egocentric, but not as a malicious deceiver. He is caught up in a human dilemma too fundamental and natural for him to be condemned as "the devil quoting Scripture for his purpose," or as "a mere heartless cad."⁴⁵ He is honest enough to recognize momentarily that his philosophy might be redeemed from its egocentrism by reaching his desired goal of infinite permanence through one point, by penetration rather than by a ceaseless stretching of experience. But his native impulse for sensual freedom prevents that redemption. Browning reveals in Juan a discrepancy between vision or mental perception and action, which is deeply rooted in instinct and character, and which illuminates the limitations in man's will. Juan has sufficient will to flaunt sensory perception and the deceptions it involves, but not sufficient will to regulate sensory experience. Relying on his own resources

for fulfilment, he cannot resist his instinctive drive for self-indulgence; sensory experience is too powerful. He can only momentarily reconcile his divided consciousness, and therefore he presents finally an ambivalent or ironic vision of life. While his self-sufficiency is proved a vanity, his sense of freedom still alienates him from conventional society (in his dream he was always an onlooker), and this predicament is also typical of the nineteenth century: "In a great deal of Romantic imagery human society is thought of as leading to alienation rather than identity, and this sense increases steadily throughout the nineteenth century as literature becomes more ironic in both tone and structure."⁴⁶ Juan, however, is the ironist rather than Browning, for, despite the ambivalence about love and about man's perception throughout the poem, Browning indicates the morally limiting factor in Juan's attitude, which is sufficient to induce a portion of satire into the poem. Frances C. Kemper distinguishes between an ironist who is uncommitted to any ideology or didactic principle, and a satirist who is committed, who judges.⁴⁷ To the extent that Browning enables the reader to judge Juan--and the extent is not nearly so great as critics have generally maintained--Browning remains a satirist who exposes the weaknesses in an ironist.

The matter-spirit debate which informs Juan's ironic vision is, of course, central in Western literature, and both the play of elements and the Neoplatonic thought in the poem place it in this tradition. Imagery of the four elements--earth, air, fire and water--occurs many times in the poem, and central to Juan's quest is his desire to attain

the more refined elements, to lift himself into air from water and to draw forth the flame which lurks behind "earth's coarsest covertures" (337). His assertion of an eventual fusion with some other soul, or "lodestar" (901), is akin to Aristophanes' twin-soul concept in the Symposium, and the transcendentalism he attempts to maintain in his view of matter is comparable with Platonic Idealism. The influence of Shelley and Carlyle on Browning is no doubt evidenced here. However, the difference from Juan's more Platonic predecessors lies in his emphasis on individual man and on the transforming power of his imagination (or "soul," to use his term) as the source of all value. Spiritual reality is not pre-existent or to be reached by man; it is created by man.

Having his more immediate origins in romantic literature, Juan also anticipates aspects of twentieth-century thought and writing.⁴⁸ His statement, for example, that man's task is to transform inert matter is more fully developed in Rilke's Duino Elegies: ". . . the most visible joy /can only reveal itself to us when we've transformed it, within."⁴⁹ His notion, hinted at briefly, of the imagination creating its own permanence is epitomized later by Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium," where the artist desires to move, by means of his own creation, into "the artifice of eternity." And Juan's emphasis on the importance of artifice, on distinguishing between simulation and reality, and on the element of deception in all human existence, in all reality, is seen again in Wallace Stevens' "Adagia": "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly."⁵⁰

Juan, however, is not completely a modern existential man; he remains a transitional figure. Moving avidly towards a definition of solipsistic existence, he never quite relinquishes established modes of thought. There is his use of the term soul itself and his efforts to penetrate the veil of reality. There are also his few and casual, seemingly involuntary, references to God and faith (876, 907, 1515, 2188), and his short-lived admittance of the need for faith in love (2281, 2283). The equivocation implies, of course, Browning's own unwillingness to cease hoping for a divine absolute or for permanent existence. "It is characteristic of Browning that what he wants to maintain is . . . that for himself personally there is still room, if not for certainty, at least for hope."⁵¹

One of the most integral and neglected qualities of Fifine at the Fair is its nature as a "poem of experience," a quality frequently ignored by critics who become antagonized by its "metaphysical" content.⁵² This quality is directly concerned with the soul-body or thought-feeling debate, and therefore with Juan's exercise of deception. To observe that Browning developed the dramatic monologue in order to restore the association of thought and feeling, to record the momentary truth of an integrated experience or epiphany, is now a critical commonplace.⁵³

Browning's most highly praised monologues usually present this experience directly, as it occurs, with the persona, since he is concentrating on his act (invariably a verbal act), unconscious of the integrating process he is engaged in. Obviously, his lack of awareness is a logical necessity, since to be conscious of, that is to think about, fusing "the elements of

thought, feeling and perceived object" is to contradict that fusion.

"My Last Duchess," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto," "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" afford examples of this poetry of experience.

Fifine at the Fair, however, is more complex, because Juan has a more complex self-consciousness.

Juan is certainly engaged in conflict with Elvire about his feelings for Fifine, and this situation makes the poem a usual monologue, a poem of experience. But Juan's discourse far exceeds the bounds of that argument, in excess even of other monologuists, and becomes, as he realizes in section LXXXVIII, a rational contemplation divorced from any immediate emotional involvement with either Fifine or Elvire. The women become appropriate because necessary appendages of his thought and personality. On the other hand, that rational contemplation is not without emotional energy either, because it emanates from Juan's intellectual fear of non-being. In effect, he oscillates between passages of expression which arise from a combined emotional and mental anxiety, and which therefore fall within Browning's usual type of dramatic monologue, and passages which more nearly approximate abstract thought. Juan does not so much move dramatically towards a new epiphany in the usual manner of monologuists (although he does unwittingly reach this in section CXXIX), as endeavour to recreate a previously experienced epiphany (which he achieves in section CXXIV). He pursues this recreation both for Elvire's benefit, in order to justify his rationalization about Fifine, and for his own, in order to sustain the continual process of satisfying his own reality. This complex effort of mind means that he consciously

attempts, through metaphor, through the recreation or simulation of all kinds of experience--aesthetic (music), physical (swimming), imaginative (dream)--to validate a perception of reality which he also describes rationally; and the subtleties in this process may account for critical puzzlement about the poem, particularly for critical dissatisfaction with its uneven tone. Isobel Armstrong, for example, says it contains "erratic flashes of strange intensity."⁵⁴ But the poem's unity, excitement and verbal brilliance is easily apparent; if the reader recognizes the incisive, refined tension elicited by Juan's awareness of his predicament in having to recreate his insight or be condemned for mere intellectual, and therefore problematic, unconvincing knowledge, and also by the underlying fear that he may not achieve this desired result. The poem dramatizes the persona's process of trying to recreate experience, with deception prominent at each stage, on each level, both in the surface, immediate awareness and in the simulated, recreated event.

Fifine at the Fair dramatizes the struggle between concept and intuition; it is the drama of man's conceptual process struggling to apprehend intuitional experience. Although the language and metrical patterning is quite different, Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" presents a similar predicament. Susanne Langer's comment on Wordsworth's poem could, for example, be applied also to Fifine at the Fair: "The logical structure of the thought is really very loose; yet the whole composition sounds like a piece of metaphysical reasoning, and the semblance of fresh ideas occurring in very unacademic surroundings gives it a peculiar depth, which is really depth of experience rather than

depth of intellect."⁵⁵ There is no reason to assume that either Wordsworth or Browning lacked "depth of intellect," and Juan's handling of deception is highly sophisticated. The important point, however, is the integral role which thought has in human experience and the depth it supplies to otherwise superficial, even if intensely dramatic, action. Susanne Langer continues: "Thinking is part of our instinctive activity --the most human, emotional, and individual part. . . . it is so intimate-bound up with language that meditation is inseparable from ways of speaking. . . . discursive thought . . . is in turn the mold of our individual experience."⁵⁶ Browning is not concerned so much with the product of thought, external action, as with the flow of thought, the internal act which forms the actual process of moulding experience.

In Fifine at the Fair, the persona is engaged in precisely this kind of verbal act, and the gap which he is conscious of between his expression and his previous insight, between mental reflection and intuition, directly embodies the gap between mind and body--man's dualism. His prolixity, in part the product of a fertile and agile mind, is necessary to overcome this schism, since he must consider a variety of circumstances and phrases in order to comprehend the complexity of his perception. Because he is aware that all perceptual processes are subject to deception, because he is dependent for knowledge and existence on a reality which presents a "natural lie," and because he is conscious of the artifice necessary to his thought and experience, the end which he attains is an "histrionic truth."

NOTES

¹King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 172.

²The speaker is unnamed in the poem, but his wife is named Elvire, and by analogy with the epigraph from Moliere's Don Juan, the suggestion is that he is Juan. He is not, however, merely a Libertine. See King, p. 175.

³Morse Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries (New York: Braziller, 1970), p. 117.

⁴See, e.g., Mrs S. Orr, A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning, 6th edition (London: Bell, 1892), p. 150; J. T. Nettleship, "On Browning's 'Fifine at the Fair,'" Browning Society Papers, 1 (1882), 199-230, particularly p. 223; Arthur Symonds, Browning, new ed. (London: Dent, 1906), p. 177; Edward Dowden, Robert Browning (London: Dent, 1904), pp. 301-306; Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 318. Browning himself fostered this attitude when he told Dr. Furnivall "that his fancy was to show morally how a Don Juan might justify himself partly by truth, somewhat by sophistry" (Browning Society Papers, 2 [1888], 242*). See also n.8 below.

⁵See, respectively, H. C. Duffin, Amphibian (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), p. 249, and N. B. Crowell, The Triple Soul (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963), p. 221.

⁶Charlotte C. Watkins, "The 'Abstruser Themes' of Browning's Fifine at the Fair," PMLA, 74 (1959), 427.

⁷J. L. Kendall, "Browning's Fifine at the Fair: Meaning and Method," Victorian Newsletter, No. 22 (Fall 1962), 16-18; Drew, pp. 304-306 (first published in Essays in Criticism, 17 [April 1967], 144-155).

⁸See Philip Drew's excellent comment on Juan's casuistry (p. 313, n.1). He points out that casuistry "is not necessarily an invalid method of proceeding: it becomes so only if the object of the casuist is to present a series of hypothetical cases in such a way as to blur the distinction between morality and immorality and so justify immoral conduct. . . . The difficulty confronting those who wish to represent Juan as a casuist is that of demonstrating precisely where he carries his discrimination of cases beyond the bounds of what is necessary."

⁹King, p. 176.

¹⁰Drew, pp. 307-308.

¹¹Clyde de L. Ryals, "Browning's Amphibian: Don Juan at Home," Essays in Criticism, 19 (1969), 210-217. An extraordinarily acute (for the time) review-article in Temple Bar, 37 (1873), 315-328, also observes the "double tendency of existence" which is central to the poem.

¹²Drew, p. 320.

¹³King, p. 184.

¹⁴Juan's definition of his soul's world is complex, although it never really moves beyond what could be understood as the imagination's world. Cf. King, p. 173: Browning in Fifine at the Fair "gives soul . . . its fullest amplification."

¹⁵See Ryals, pp. 210, 216.

¹⁶This point has been made previously in an unpublished dissertation by Nancy Libby, "Browning's Fifine at the Fair: A Critical Study," (Duke University, 1955), p. 128, n.9.

¹⁷Kendall, p. 17. Kendall is replying to Charlotte Watkins' statement that the speaker "is 'amphibian' because as a mortal he lives in the world of human experience but as an artist, in the 'sea' of poetry, he imitates ideal truth, such as only the immortal souls could certainly know, and his poetry records his imaginative vision of these truths" (Watkins, p. 427). See also Philip Drew, who follows Kendall (p. 306), and Temple Bar, 37 (Feb. 1873), 316.

¹⁸King, p. 174.

¹⁹Cf. Drew: "it would be irrelevant to judge" her (p. 308).

²⁰Elvire's language is a delightful, if somewhat caustic, travesty of Juan's light images in section XXX. Light imagery occurs throughout the poem and forms one of the several controlling metaphors which give unity and design to the poem. See Watkins, p. 427, for a brief outline of sun imagery. The intricate punctuation required here might also be noted as an indication of Juan's complex handling of point of view.

²¹King, p. 179.

²²The first edition reads: "My life in." The more general noun is probably meant as part of Juan's artifice in removing the argument from his specific circumstances; the device also registers his efforts at rationalization.

²³Cf. "I may assert Eternal Providence, /And justify the ways of

God to men," Paradise Lost, I. 25-26; and "Laugh where we must, be candid where we can, /But vindicate the ways of God to man," An Essay on Man, I. 15-16.

²⁴See below, pp. 97-99.

²⁵See also p. 111 below.

²⁶Cf. King, p. 181.

²⁷Cf. Drew, p. 321. A Freudian interpretation of the poem as embodying Browning's frustrated sexual life is proposed by Barbara Melchiori, in "Browning's Don Juan," Essays in Criticism, 16 (1966), 416-440, rpt. in Browning's Poetry of Reticence (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968). Philip Drew replies to this article, and restores critical sanity, in "Another View of Fifine at the Fair," Essays in Criticism, 17 (1967), 244-255. See also W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), pp. 364-370.

²⁸See Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: Random House, 1957), and also Morse Peckham, "Toward a Theory of Romanticism: II. Reconsiderations," Studies in Romanticism, I (1961), 1-8.

²⁹Langbaum, p. 47.

³⁰Philip Drew identifies the monument as a dolmen, which was always a sepulchre; also, he says, "the cross [the 'Bar-sinister'] is not a sign of Christian worship but something hateful" (Drew, p. 315).

³¹See, e.g., 1 John, 4:19: "We love him, because he first loved us."

³²Drew, p. 320.

³³King, p. 186.

³⁴King, pp. 186-187.

³⁵See, e.g., Orr, p. 161; E. Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopaedia (London: Allen, 1897), p. 173; H. Wilson, A Primer on Browning (London: Macmillan, 1891), p. 176; W. Raymond, The Infinite Moment, 2nd edition (University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 125-127 (Raymond reads the Epilogue autobiographically); Drew, p. 317.

³⁶See William Whitla, The Central Truth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 143. Dowden uses the line to refute Mrs Orr's opinion that the poem was a "piece of perplexing cynicism" (Dowden, p. 303; Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning [London: Murray, 1908], p. 282).

³⁷Kendall, p. 18.

³⁸Ryals, p. 217.

³⁹King, p. 188.

⁴⁰W. David Shaw, "Browning's Duke as Theatrical Producer," Victorian Newsletter, No. 29 (Spring 1966), 18-22.

⁴¹Shaw, p. 22.

⁴²See, e.g., Peckham, p. 117.

⁴³Shaw, p. 21.

⁴⁴Goethe, Faust: Part Two, V.vi, trans. Philip Wayne (Penguin, 1959), p. 269. Roma King offers other reasons for comparing Faust (pp. 183, 185).

⁴⁵Raymond, p. 111; Duffin, p. 249.

⁴⁶Northrop Frye, A Study of English Romanticism (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 47.

⁴⁷F. C. Kemper, "Irony and Browning's Fifine at the Fair," Diss., Pennsylvania 1962, p. 11. Miss Kemper bases her definition on the philosophical attitudes which underlie irony and satire; in this, she follows Andrew H. Wright in Jane Austen's Novels (New York: Chatto and Windus, 1953). Her failure to make a distinction between persona and author is, however, a flaw in her argument.

⁴⁸Recent literary scholarship, notably that of Morse Peckham and Robert Langbaum, has pointed out, of course, that many concepts inherent in twentieth-century literature are essentially a continuation of those which underlie most romantic art.

⁴⁹Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Seventh Elegy," Duino Elegies, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (1939; rpt. New York: Norton, 1963), p. 61. See also "The Ninth Elegy."

⁵⁰Wallace Stevens, "Adagia," in Opus Posthumous, ed. S. F. Morse (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 163.

⁵¹Drew, p. 198. Drew develops a comprehensive discussion of Browning's religious poems in Chapter Nine.

⁵²Browning, as is now well known, said the poem was "the most metaphysical and boldest he had written since Sordello"; recorded in The Diary of Alfred Domett, 1872-1885, ed. E. A. Horsman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 52.

⁵³See Langbaum, Chapter One.

⁵⁴Isobel Armstrong, "The Brownings," in The Victorians, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1970), p. 307.

⁵⁵Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 220.

⁵⁶Langer, p. 220.

CHAPTER THREE

RED COTTON NIGHT-CAP COUNTRY, OR TURF AND TOWERS:

FLAWED PERCEPTION AND THE ART OF SELF-PRESERVATION

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau and Fifine at the Fair each features a persona who controls his world by manipulating it. The Prince's skilled handling of point of view and Juan's assiduous exercise of artifice assures each of them a high degree of success. By contrast, Léonce Miranda, the protagonist in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, is a slave of circumstances rather than their master; rather than the player, he is the played upon. Like both the Prince and Juan, he is tormented by inner conflict, but he cannot resolve the antagonism, because he lacks the intellectual acuity to discriminate properly between illusion and reality. Unable to handle paradox, he destroys himself through an inept attempt to prove his worth, through the inadequate effort of his fancy to merge the reality of illusion with the reality of physical fact.

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country has received some of the most severe criticism directed at Browning's poems, mainly because of the sordidness and ugliness in the story.¹ William DeVane also blames the rapid composition of the poem--it was written in two months--for its lack of public success, but Browning had written quickly before and the crucial point is almost certainly the grotesque subject-matter--a point well-made by an exasperated Carlyle: "nobody out of Bedlam ever before thought of choosing such a theme."² Browning himself was obviously excited by his

subject, although he was also worried, it seems, about his ability to deal with it properly: "I have got such a subject for a poem, if I can only do justice to it."³ Eschewing the dramatic monologue form, he employs a narrator engaged in conversation with a friend, maintaining in the process an omniscience and a distance from the events which by preventing an overly sympathetic involvement with the characters prevent any simple sensationalism. DeVane says "the poem loses in intensity because it is narrative instead of dramatic monologue,"⁴ but the narrative, if somewhat rambling, encompasses passages which are both diffuse and intense, and the poem finally coalesces into an extraordinary unity of opposites, effecting what Arthur Symons called "the impressiveness of contrast."⁵

The conversational tone and relaxed intimacy with his listener, which are established immediately--"And so, here happily we meet, fair friend!" (1)--enable the poet to induce a mood of quiet credibility. The casualness of the occasion allows him to exercise his mind in a playful and spontaneous contemplation of the countryside around him--its appearance, its apparent calm and purity, and the deceptiveness of that appearance. Since the poem depends entirely on the control of its narrator, it is important to notice his mixture of mental analysis and poetic evocation. He enjoys the "growth unsheaved /Of emerald luzern bursting into blue" (24-25); he readily acknowledges the legitimacy of his companion's symbolic title for the place, "'White Cotton Night-cap Country,'" for people do wear "This badge of soul and body in repose" (149). But he also makes distinctions; he is, for example, unsatisfied

with the statement that a fiddle means "Just a fiddle" (248), playing upon the exclamatory sense of "fiddle" as trivial frivolity and "fiddle" as instrument. The literal eye, which appreciates the surface qualities, the "sweet rusticities" of the land around it,

From stalwart strider by the waggon-side,
Brightening the acre with his purple blouse,
To those dark-featured comely women-folk,
Healthy and tall, at work, and work indeed,
On every cottage door-step, plying brisk
Bobbins that bob you ladies out such lace! (115-120)

is augmented by the mental eye, which perceives different levels of existence or reality. An atmosphere may be misleading, and meaning is something more distinctive; the narrator, therefore, "Proceeds . . . to recognize /Distinctions" (246-247). This combination of qualitative description and mental penetration marks the poet's technique throughout, and enables him to unite the surface realism of social circumstances with the hidden realism of psychological resources. The result is typically Browningsque; the method differs from his general pattern.

Browning's broad purpose in the poem is clear. He tells Miranda's story in order to illustrate man's inability to distinguish false appearances from inner truth, his adherence to external signs, whether they be emblems of belief or indications of social convention. Roma King says Browning "seems uncertain of his intentions," that he does not develop "into a single, unifying theme" his separate interests in "the grotesque irony of the subject," and in "the superstitious nature of a religion which in the name of saints destroys human beings."⁶ These interests are united, however, through the theme of deception, which in the poem is

predominantly a matter of images. Miranda's abnormality lies in his divided personality which does not allow him to distinguish the illusory from the real, with the added complication of his Catholic faith which emphasizes the importance of images and their worship. For someone who has been taught the power of religious symbol, the literal application of belief becomes a strong impulse; for a man of Miranda's weak intellect, the impulse becomes irresistible. As always, Browning is fascinated by the processes through which man deceives himself or others, and he is severely critical of institutions which exploit those processes.

While Browning still demonstrates his usual interest in individual character,⁷ his use of an omniscient narrator who interprets events, instead of his usual dependence on the protagonist's limited point of view, enables him to range wider in theme and social implications than in many monologues. The poem's perspective establishes a broader interest than that supplied by one man's spiritual dilemma. The poem, through humour and a sustained irony, takes on many of the attributes of social satire, and Browning clearly intends the story to have universal significance. The narrator and his friend meet on an "unpretending beach" (17), which, despite its humble circumstances, is a "razor-edge 'twixt earth and sea" where the poet stands "at such a distance from the world / That 'tis the whole world which obtains regard" (181-183). One spot, he says, provides any man who has a soul "to see and use" with notice that "through the place he sees, / A place is signified he never saw" (62-63). He acknowledges the inauspicious social fare offered by the local village, but nevertheless perceives a "formidable" fact: "Little Saint-Rambert touches

the great sea" (95), the "natural blue" which "Broods o'er a bay of secrets, all unbroached" (90-91).

Browning, of course, is defending his selection of an ordinary, apparently dull and quite uninteresting area for his setting and subject-matter, and this defence he admits:

. . . this is a pretence, you understand,
Disparagement in play, to parry thrust
Of possible objector: nullity
And ugliness, the taunt be his, not mine
Nor yours,--I think we know the world too well! (99-103)

These lines supply a good indication of Browning's technique and effect, particularly in part one. (The poem is divided into four parts.) The good-humoured tone is pleasantly ingratiating, establishing an intimacy and openness with his listener. By assuming, with her, and by implication with his reader, that they "know the world too well" to accuse the place of "nullity and ugliness," he attempts to forestall the reader's objections to his subject. It might be objected that this statement is too obvious a ploy and that the "thrust" would be parried without advertising the fact. But the confession of pretence is not as blatantly obvious as it may appear. Browning's claim that his disparagement was play, and therefore not to be taken seriously, could also apply to his "truth" about the sea (89) or to the possibility of light in "Earth's ugliest . . . imprisonment" (65); yet presumably he wishes his reader to consider these notions more earnestly. His pose of playfulness, therefore, renders all statements doubtful and posits an irony which requires careful attention. At this stage, doubt about what is or is not meant

seriously is highly appropriate for Browning's purpose, since it urges the reader to suspend his judgement of truth and event in case the poet catches him out. The reader is in a sense being warned not to take anything at surface value, and this warning is an important preparation for the narrative which follows.

Browning clearly plays a game with his companion (and reader) in artfully agreeing to the nature and quality of appearances, while still maintaining that such bland generalizations are inadequate. He ranges broadly over the county before him and over the affairs of men as they are there represented, and then gradually focuses on smaller areas, ending with Miranda's country estate. This process of an increasingly narrowed focus continues throughout the poem, until in part four he elaborates Miranda's inner thoughts. Carefully controlling his story throughout, he suspends his revelatory points, introducing each with dramatic impact, and leads skilfully to his climax, Miranda's ironically triumphant leap from his tower. In this poem, the narrator openly controls the artifice of its presentation: conscious of his role as artificer (725), he both withholds information (873) and manipulates the symbols through which he unifies the whole work (1144-1147).

The playfulness is most fully exploited in the first section, where Browning delights in his exercise of perception and speculation, in pretending to be losing his argument while always secure in the knowledge that he could win it at will. His plea for generosity on the part of his opponent is a typically neat piece of ironic teasing:

You must be generous, strain point, and call
 Victory, any the least flush of pink
 Made prize of, labelled scarlet for the nonce--
 Faintest pretension to be wrong and red
 And picturesque, that varies by a splotch
 The righteous flat of insipidity. (393-398)

The element of play allows the intrusion of slang--what Roma King disapprovingly refers to as "a careless colloquialness"⁹--without undue disruption of the tone and effect. It also allows a subtle undermining of established values, which is part of the poem's satiric intention. For example, in the passage just quoted, what was white, or pure and serene, has become righteous and insipid. The lightly comic effect of splotch keeps this changed quality from being taken too seriously, and the hint of criticism is a rhetorical device rather than a serious implication, though it is nevertheless present.

The lighthearted surface of the language should not, as suggested, be taken for granted. Lurking beneath apparently unmethodical references are symbols, themes and ideas which are constantly and unobtrusively introduced, until, at the end of part one, all important elements in the poem which are to be developed are prepared for, except the turf and towers emblem, which opens section two. The Miranda name, for example, is casually mentioned almost immediately, as the narrator hails his friend, reminding her of the places where they met previously (11). The church of La Ravissante is introduced equally casually as part of the landscape, though it is more emphatically noted ("There now is something like a Night-cap spire, /Donned by no ordinary Notre-Dame!"; 433-434) in order to include its significance as one of the three centres of

miraculous cures in France (with Lourdes and La Salette; 438).¹⁰ The account of the "two great real gold crowns" (460), supposedly donated by the Pope, but paid for by the "faithful of our province" (469), introduces the central role played by the church in local life, with its emphasis on a splendid show and on the illusory and far from "spontaneous bounty of the Pope" (481). Even the apparently irrelevant paragraph about the mock-miracle, which transported a "sceptical" Browning to Miranda's country-seat (531-547), anticipates Miranda's more serious and tragic attempt at the miracle of flight. And there is Clara's (Miranda's mistress) blank face, which Browning supposes "might flash significance /To who had seen his soul reflected there" (877-878). The ability of her "wax-like features" (851) to correspond with whoever looks at them, and so reveal his importance to himself, anticipates the subtlety of Clara's technique for self-preservation, and the complex master-slave relationship between her and Miranda. For the moment, Browning simply points out that to have one's importance reflected by another is a more delicate "solace to conceit" than to be challenged by some independent companion (865-870); this is because the soul's reflection is easier to govern--"Why should your soul's reflection rule your soul" (871)--and because mastery over the reflection, manifested in someone else, gives the illusion of mastery over another.

One of the two dominating sets of symbols in the poem, the red and white night-cap, is also plainly discussed in part one. As Philip Drew notes, "white, not surprisingly, stands for innocence and serenity, red for guilt and sin."¹¹ But these symbols are more complex than this

definition suggests: the white-red opposition also becomes a heaven-hell opposition (556-558), or white can become falsely righteous or insipid, and red picturesque (396-398). Most important are the associations with red. Browning's example of a red night-cap is that given to Louis XVI when he was confronted by the revolutionary mob in 1792; this cap, Browning says, is "The Phrygian symbol, the new crown of thorns, /The Cap of Freedom" (313-314), and the red cap thus takes on associations of emasculation, martyrdom and freedom.

It is not certain what the "Phrygian symbol" implies exactly. A Phrygian cap is usually associated with liberty, which is probably Browning's intended meaning, since he almost certainly got the night-cap image from Carlyle's The French Revolution, where the phrase "Phrygian Cap-of-Liberty" appears.¹² However, he does say "Phrygian symbol," not specifically a Phrygian cap, and there are other associations which are also appropriate to the poem. The priests of Cybele, whose cult was centred in Phrygia, were eunuchs in imitation of Attis, who, in one version of the legend, castrated himself after being driven mad by Cybele when she was jealous of his desire to marry another. In the poem, Miranda's burning of his hands is assuredly a symbolic castration, made explicit by his announcement that he and Clara have "changed" and that she is to be his brother (2755-2756).¹³ He mutilates his hands out of the remorse and excessive guilt which arise in him after his mother's death, so that in effect his madness is caused, if indirectly, by his jealous mother. The parallel with the Attis legend is even closer when it is noted that Cybele, as a goddess of nature, is the Phrygian Mother of the Gods.

Worship of Cybele was adopted by the Romans in 204 B.C., and there is a statue of Attis in the Lateran Museum at Rome which depicts him with a Phrygian cap.¹⁴ There is no evidence that Browning ever saw this statue, but its cap does add another link between the Phrygian symbol and Attis. One meaning, then, of the phrase could be emasculation, which is appropriate to the red cap that Miranda finally presents (3600).

An association of Phrygian with Attis, whose supposed death and resurrection anticipated Christ, is also appropriate to the "new crown of thorns," which obviously refers to Christ. In its immediate context, the phrase makes the death of Louis XVI a parody of Christ's martyrdom, a parody rendered grotesque by his "feeble mirth," by his "ejaculation, ground so hard / Between his teeth, that only God could hear," and by his "liver-worried stare" (314-320). Miranda's unintended martyrdom, for the cause of his faith in La Ravissante, becomes an even more grotesque parody of Christ, with the parallel also apparent in Miranda's scene on the tower, which, as Roma King observes, is a travesty of Christ's second temptation.¹⁵ Miranda acts in an opposite manner to Christ, and his martyrdom or "crown of thorns" is dramatically ironic; Miranda acts in the illusory expectation of triumph.

Finally, the cap as a symbol of freedom, already ironic in the context of Louis and the French revolution, is equally ironic when applied to Miranda. His freedom, like his faith, is illusory and self-deceived. Browning, then, in one gesture fuses sensational event, character and religion into the one grotesque and ironic symbol of the red cotton night-cap. When Miranda lies dead on the turf (which unites the poem's other

dominant metaphor, turf and towers), and it is apparent that his own blood forms his red cap (3600), the symbol is climaxed in one macabre stroke of horrified recognition: at that moment, "The Phrygian symbol, the new crown of thorns, /The Cap of Freedom," all belong to the wretched Miranda. The wide-ranging associations of the symbol and their application to one specific instance also evince Browning's combined interest in generalization and individual example.

Part two opens with an extended passage about ruins, from which the contrasted metaphors of turf and towers emerge. The ruins afford Browning another vehicle for suggesting both the individual implications and the universal significance of his story. He presents some fallen architecture--a mixture of choking obstruction and picturesque attractiveness--for contemplation, and poses the question of whether to renovate the building or to let it decay naturally in the course of time. His proposed answer observes the danger in admiring too readily what is merely picturesque, since what appears secure amidst ruins is not necessarily so; therefore, he proposes to remove "what is plain obstruction," and to "Let partial-ruin stand while ruin may, /And serve world's use" (1090-1094), suggesting transformation rather than reuse. An old belfry, for example, although quite dangerous for bells, may be quite suitable for an astronomer (1095-1100). The task is to separate the firm from the infirm, lest they both be destroyed,

lest the tread
Of too-much-tried impatience trample out
Solid and unsubstantial to one blank
Mud-mixture, picturesque to nobody,-- (1081-1084)

a task which involves the distinction between what is really safe and what only seems safe.

When Browning applies the image to Miranda's predicament, his struggle through a world "strewn /With ravage of opinions" (1103-1104), it is clear that the ruins encompass man's received beliefs and institutions. Because they are in a state of disrepair, they require careful navigation, and that navigation requires a perception which Miranda lacks:

. . . neither he, nor any friendly wit,
Knew and could teach him which was firm, which frail,
In his adventure to walk straight through life
The partial-ruin,--in such enterprise,
He straggled into rubbish, struggled on,
And stumbled out again observably. (1105-1110)

As a result, his judgment is almost invariably false:

"Yon buttress still can back me up," he judged:
And at a touch down came both he and it. (1111-1112)

The problem of renovation prepares the way for Miranda's attempt to renovate or reaffirm faith in miracles and for Clara's attempt, twice, to renovate or rehabilitate Miranda. Both efforts, Browning shows, are based on selfish and erroneous perception.

The narrator also raises at this point some associated moral issues, as he asks about the advice his listener would give a "climber" among ruins. Should the climber fall, "Head-break to him will be heart-break" to whoever advocated non-interference with the ruins, perhaps because they offer material for artists: "let poets, painters keep a

prize! /Beside, a sage pedestrian picks his way'" (1131-1132). All may be well, the narrator says, if the pedestrian is, as stated, sage, but "What if there trip, in merry carelessness, /And come to grief, a weak and foolish child?" (1134-1135). Browning is concerned about the dangers provided by decaying ideologies and beliefs which are permitted to remain untouched, a deceptive mixture of the valuable and the rotten. He is also concerned about the morality of allowing such a situation to continue. Even a wise and perceptive adventurer among the "ravage of opinions" must tread warily and with frustrating slowness (1137-1142); therefore, for "brisk youth," the attempt "To foot it fast and easy" is almost inevitably tragic, although Browning, for dramatic purposes, does not mention as yet any tragedy. He does, however, make explicit his symbolic use of turf and towers:

Keep this same
Notion of outside mound and inside mash,
Towers yet intact round turfy rottenness,
Symbolic partial-ravage,--keep in mind! (1144-1147)

Philip Drew explains the symbols in this way: "The towers, the wall, the rock, the stone, or the ridge are a symbol for faith or moral living. Significantly, they are normally spoken of as being in ruinous disrepair. The turf, or grass, or flowers are a symbol for youthful dalliance and self-indulgence."¹⁶ There is no need to qualify this interpretation, except to note that the image presented here by Browning describes the solid tower as hiding the inward rottenness. This obscuration is in accord with the thematic interest in deceptive appearances--an outwardly

strong faith may surround an inner doubt, or worse, a false belief--and it provides for towers and turf a common element (deceiving surfaces) with the red and white set of metaphors.

In the remainder of part two, Browning follows Miranda's story from his birth until his five paradisaal years at Clairvaux with Clara, and the section prepares the way for Miranda's excessive behaviour later on. His troubled personality, Browning suggests, is the combined result of inheritance and early training. His divided mind is congenital, the result of a union between passionate, Castilian blood and a cold, French, critical spirit (1151-1154); and "From infancy to boyhood" his friends "bulwarked him about" with faith (1169-1170). The legends attached to the church of La Ravissante, for example, were "sucked in along with mother's-milk" and absorbed by him as facts (1217). Challenged by the "undisputed faith" which blood establishes (1161-1162), the critical spirit attacks subtly, through crevices, until it "fronts the astonished man" inside his "faith-defence" (1163-1168). But doubt has little effect since there is no knowledge for it to fight, only "sheer ignorance." Miranda's mind is a "feather-bed /Of thoughtlessness," an intellectual vacuum, and therefore an "operating tool" which is made "to transpierce the flint-stone" is simply ineffectual, having no substance to drill through (1175-1181). In the face of this blind belief, the critical spirit changes its tactics and becomes unquestioning acceptance:

"Share and share
Alike in facts, to truth add other truth!
Why with old truth needs new truth disagree?" (1229-1231)

For Miranda, both faith and doubt are matters of the flesh, and neither the new truths nor the old are adequately supported by reason or knowledge.

As doubt invades Miranda through the flesh (1233), he is tempted to satisfy fleshly desire on the turf, before reverting to the stony platform of faith (1251-1252); he is prompted not to choose between wall and turf, but to accommodate both (1270-1273). The attempted compromise then involves a series of self-deceptions which increase in seriousness, and which eventually culminate in his final monologue.

Emerging from his first communion as a candidate for "saintship" (1295), Miranda changes his "mask" to become a gentleman of the Boulevard (1328-1330). As such, he manages a double deception, hiding his social behaviour from his parents, who thought him "their best of sons, /Type of obedience, domesticity" (1341-1342), and hiding his rich status from his mistresses. The narrator, with delicate irony, says he "Was prudent in his pleasure," passing himself off as "rich in mere good looks /Youth, hope" (1408-1411). Browning also notes how the soul seeks "a show of durability," in order to hide its subjection to change (1368-1370). Therefore, in keeping with the architectural metaphors, a tent may rise round the turf. It is "a temporary shroud, /Mock-faith to suit a mimic dwelling-place" (1372-1373), and it symbolizes Miranda's flimsy pretence that he maintains a clear evaluation, suitable to his faith, of his behaviour. Turf, then, is "acknowledged" to be only grass, and grass is "held contemptible /Compared with solid rock, the rampired ridge" (1379-1380). The narrator's wry comment suitably implies the element of

deception in such a pose:

To truth a pretty homage thus we pay
 By testifying--what we dally with,
 Falsehood, (which, never fear we take for truth!)
 We may enjoy, but then--how we despise! (1381-1384)

Miranda's conscious dalliance with sensual amusement contains an insolent pride which he cannot recognize, but which the narrator exposes by ironically referring to his understanding of "the worth of woman kind"--that they "furnish man" with "sport" (1392)--and by quoting his crudely complacent comment about his strict management of his affairs: "'never fear /My escapades cost more than market-price! /. . . Trust me, I know the world, and know myself" (1427-1432). The tendency to measure morality in material terms which is evident here will become an increasingly insistent aspect of his mental attitude.

The narrator's irony is constant and pointed as he describes Miranda as "fortified and realistic" and "against illusion armed" (1434-1435). The fortification image is, of course, appropriate to the system of architectural metaphors, although it now includes the implication that the fortification is deceptive, since one ironic meaning of Miranda's being armed against illusion is that he is armed with illusion, his "mock-faith." Indeed, his precarious security is short-lived, since almost immediately he falls "captive" to a young woman, whom he sees at the playhouse. In one moment, the "illusion-proof" youth is lost (1452-1453). His tortured chagrin, as he realizes the folly of "all that seemed so wise" (1458), and his exaggerated reaction in rushing to obtain the girl's love, become, in Browning's hands, a parody of the

soul's drama (1454-1470). But if Miranda's extravagant action is amusing, it also anticipates the more bizarre extravagance to come.

Miranda's response is real and honest enough, if ungoverned by common sense, but his perception is weak; his newly attempted "wisdom" is as much based on self-deception as his previous mock-faith. He still mistakes a dandelion for a primrose or polyanthus, and Browning hints at the similarity with "his other instance of mistake," which is yet to be told: "Was Christianity the Ravissante?" (1501). Miranda has a propensity for confusing an emblem with the reality it represents, and by implying the importance of this flaw so early in the piece, Browning enables the discerning reader to follow its development throughout Miranda's story. It gives a consistency to Miranda's personality and to Browning's construction of the poem.

Another instance of Miranda's problem with images follows his preliminary encounter with Clara. He is disturbed by the possibility that his love for her is "the vulgar sin, none hates as he" (1616). And this question, which he puts to his brother, is also intended, says the narrator, to reach "Her, the placable, the Ravissante" (1622). The drawback, Browning points out, is that the statue's fixed smile offers permanent encouragement (1623-1625), regardless of the circumstances. Some worldly and tolerant Police Commissary, on the other hand, would respond with a "twinkling apprehension" and with knowledge that could have saved this "chicken threatened with the pip" (1629-1640). This opposition between a fixed, supposedly divine, source of approval and a worldly, profane wisdom, which is based on human experience and which responds to

individual needs, is one of the important oppositions in the poem. Browning is perturbed by the consequences of divorcing the two, which any belief in the literalness of images will certainly promote.

Browning even extends the comic element in Miranda's inability to treat metaphors as metaphors to his handling of his soul: in order to determine its contents, when Clara reveals the truth about herself, he "took his soul /In both his hands, as if it were a vase" (1791-1792). He decides that the contents of his vase constitute love. Love for Clara, however, will mean renouncing the world, or social approval, and Miranda's concern with surface convention might cause him some difficulty. At this point, though, events combine to make the task easier for him--an episode which demonstrates his malleability in the hands of circumstance. First, his brother, who was his "confident, /Adviser, referee and substitute" (1827-1828), dies, and since Miranda is "meant to lean /By nature," he "needs must shift the leaning-place /To his love's bosom from his brother's neck" (1837-1839). Next, his father dies, leaving him "a fat succession" (1849). Then Clara's husband appears, and so prevents Miranda from continuing "disguise and subterfuge," from maintaining the falsehood of Clara's pretended identity, which would be socially convenient and "Therefore so pardonable--though so wrong!" (1865-1873). Finally, Miranda's mother, who, as "a daughter of the Church," and as the "one most thoroughly beloved" by Miranda before Clara, is a serious obstacle to his life with Clara, acquiesces (1937-1945). These circumstances combine to bid Miranda entrench himself even further on the turf, and thereby to regard his "tent" as a more

permanent affair than before (1963-1972). What was initially a temporary structure, a "mimic dwelling-place" (1373), now claims a stability like that of the towers, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to lie flat (1974).

The concern with literal appearances, this time with the illusion of permanency (2005-2006), is also behind Miranda and Clara's renovation of Clairvaux, the "relic half, and ruin whole" (1981), in order to "change it into Paradise!" (2010). Those with individuality, the narrator comments, prefer to be reminded occasionally that the buildings which they erect for themselves are a form of deception, that they seek an illusory permanence, before acquiring true permanence "in that far land we dream about" (2015-2022). But Miranda and Clara, despite superficial differences, wear "the flock's uniform" (2033). They belong to the mass of people and therefore follow common convention as far as possible. They did not leave Paris as an assertion of independence, but as an attempt to forestall and so avoid public disapproval: "They gave a kick . . . /To Paris ere it turned and kicked themselves!" (2035-2036). And the menace of the wall, which is always in Miranda's mind, serves as further motivation to keep up appearances:

"Soon or late will drop
Pavilion, soon or late you needs must march,
And laggards will be sorry they were slack!
Always--unless excuse sound plausible!" (2112-2115)

Consequently, he works enough to give the impression of working, he dabbles enough in painting, music and literature to learn how difficult they are, enough to delude himself into believing that these "playings

at life's toil" (2134) dissipate his offences against society and against the towers of faith (2116-2143).

In part three, Miranda's mother and cousins disturb his contrived equanimity. His mother admonishes his reckless expenditure and reminds him of his high ideals (2199-2206). She is the woman "whom most he feared and loved" (2200), and her criticism strikes hard. Yet she had not asked him earlier to choose between her and Clara; consequently, he is faced with the dilemma of accommodating both women, and all they pertain to morally (2238-2246). One of his mother's main objections is directed at a tower which Miranda has built at Clairvaux, and the contrast between his tower and her game of cards implies the severe difference in their situations: she is secure in the towers of faith "And there took pastime," while "he was still on Turf" (2261), and so built a Belvedere to give the illusion of faith. His act of restoration is even more clearly now an act of deception. But his mother's words and religious position have made him realize that he is "still on Turf," and though he maintains the idea that he can still reach the towers at will, whenever he chooses (2262-2263), he vents his anxiety in anger "with himself, /With her, with all the world and much beside" (2264-2265). The Seine is suddenly before him and he is tempted to "'Go and be rid of memory in a bath!'" (2274). He jumps, and Browning's words--"Done as soon as dreamed" (2276)--indicate his impulsive and extreme behaviour. His conversion of fancy into action too precipitately is an unfortunate aspect of his temperament which will eventually lead to his death. As part of his character, this hastiness is no simple matter, but is a combination

of his fluctuating emotions, his dull mind, his religious training, his literalness, his subordination to circumstances, and his complete divorce from common sense.

When his mother dies, and Miranda is confronted by the "scenic show" (2422)--which, the narrator suggests, is designed by his cousins (2381-2386)--and by the accusing voice of the priest--"You murdered her!" (2425)--his tent, his temporary dwelling, finally collapses (2432-2438).¹⁷ His guilt removes the illusion with which he has deceived himself, and the towers, the faith he badly wants, stand "distinct and dread" before him. He determines to abandon all self-indulgence--"'Vanity /Was ended: its redemption must begin'" (2464-2465)--and the way is prepared for his acts of remorse and purification.

His purgation by fire is an extraordinary instance of his folly with images. Forced into extreme revulsion towards his past life by a mixture of guilt, remorse and desire for atonement, he regards literally his union of the flesh with Clara. Unable to understand that the mind's images are not to be dispelled by burning the body, he is tormented by a vision which he cannot exorcise:

"She is my body, she and I are one,
Yet, all the same, there, there at the bed-foot stands
The woman wound about my flesh and blood,
There, the arms open, the more wonderful,
The whiter for the burning . . . Vanish thou!
Avaunt, fiend's self found in the form I wore!" (2639-2644)

The "fiend's self," of course, is not part of his physical form, but is a product of his imagination, and his confusion of these distinctions suggests madness. Sanity, however, is not as simple as that, for

Beaumont, his physician, regards body and soul as synonymous terms, and therefore thinks him deranged because insensitive to pain:

"Mad, or why thus insensible to pain?
Body and soul are one thing, with two names
For more or less elaborated stuff." (1652-1654)

"Such," Browning continues, "is the new Religio Medici," and he refers to the "old unscientific ways" which understood the soul to be master of the body and consequently independent in feeling (2655-2674). He "notes" these ways, and therefore is not concerned to enforce some dogmatic principle, but his remarks do imply both the mysteries involved and the power of the mind to concentrate so fiercely on its own images that bodily torment is insignificant beside its own obsessions. This interest in the question of madness prepares for Browning's later assertion that Miranda's leap is "sane" (3603), and serves as another example of the constant juxtaposition in the poem of dramatic incident or description and analysis or speculative comment. The two go together, so that the horror of Miranda's purifying act is mitigated by a more detached interest in the reasons and processes of mind which produce it. The act and horror must be retained, though, lest the speculation have only academic appeal.

This grotesque act is also skilfully prepared for in part three by seemingly innocuous fire images which promote a deep sense of uneasiness in the reader. In blaming Clara for Miranda's "illicit bond" with her, his mother says she thought "the smoking flax" would smoulder away, and asks, "Is spark to strengthen, prove consuming fire?" (2220). The

narrator says Miranda is "all affection, all one fire of heart /Flaming toward Madame-mother" (2237-2238), and Beaumont, noticing Miranda's obsession with "A certain woman-shape," observes that the "cold Seine could not quench this flame" (2295). Clara, when trying to restore Miranda's health and spirits, asks him to let in the light of new year and to keep her warm (2348). He responds: "Let New Year contribute warmth-- /I shall refuse no fuel that may blaze" (2352-2353). "Nor did he," the narrator cryptically comments, and this statement of Miranda's is particularly ominous in terms of his tendency to literalness. Then, when Miranda is reported to be reading Clara's letters before the hearth-fire, one of his cousins stands "Warming his own hands at the fire," and quips caustically "Better he shovelled them all in at once, /And burned the rubbish!" (2565-2567). The cousin's act is quite natural since it is snowing outside--a realistic detail supplied by Browning, presumably to contribute to the ordinariness of the scene and to add another contrast--and yet the fire has become a portentous centre of attention. In similar fashion, Miranda's tower becomes an even more important focus of his folly and unifying symbol in the poem. His mother's scorn, for example, forms one of the most suggestive and threatening references to it:

"This Tower, stuck like a fool's-cap on the roof--
Do you intend to soar to heaven from thence?
Tower, truly! Better had you planted turf--
More fitly would you dig yourself a hole
Beneath it for the final journey's help!" (2229-2233)

Miranda's return to Clara after he has declared he will leave her

forever is apparently a new attempt to deal with the reality of his position. He at least recognizes that neither is his "earthly love" a sham, nor his "heavenly fear" a counterfeit: "'Each may oppose each, yet be true alike!'" (2844). His task now is to handle the paradox, to "Unite the opposites" without abandoning either, and he sees the means for this in a revocation of worldly wealth (2853-2857). He gives "gifts /To God and to God's poor," in order to "stay /In sin and yet stave off sin's punishment" (3126-3128), and because of the deal with his cousins about his jewelry business, he can give generously. But this penance is simply another show of outward belief which is at variance with the inner state of affairs. The narrator tells of Miranda's generosity, of "Such signs of grace, outward and visible," rather, he says, than "put in evidence the inward strife, /Spiritual effort to compound for fault /By payment of devotion" (3165-3169). The strength and desperation of this spiritual effort is contained in Miranda's continuing punishment of his flesh by walking from La Ravissante to Clairvaux on his knees. The punishment is intended it seems to compensate for his physical indulgence, since he otherwise leads as normal a life as possible within the limits of his crippled condition (3206-3217).

Until part four, Browning as narrator describes Miranda's character from without, and therefore overtly controls the reader's view of him. In part four, he dramatizes Miranda's thoughts and allows the reader to experience directly the processes of deception which cloud Miranda's mind. A conjunction of wealth and spirit, an equation between the soul's worth and the body's worth, is immediately apparent:

"This Spring-morn I am forty-three years old:
 In prime of life, perfection of estate
 Bodily, mental, nay, material too,--
 My whole of worldly fortunes reach their height.
 Body and soul alike on eminence:
 It is not probable I ever raise
 Soul above standard by increase of worth,
 Nor reasonably may expect to lift
 Body beyond the present altitude." (3288-3296)

As usual, Browning's ironic play is evident in this passage, since, standing on his tower, Miranda has his body and soul literally "alike on eminence" at the "height" of their "fortunes." Of course, the play element is no longer comic and the implications are correspondingly severe. Miranda cannot "reasonably" expect to lift his body higher, but he can expect it unreasonably, which he proceeds to do.

La Ravissante's power over Miranda is inherited from his mother. As a mother-figure associated with religious belief, she is an appropriate and logical substitute, and Miranda attempts to yield her an equally appropriate devotion. But his offering is external and therefore a form of deception. When he says he "gave" himself to her, he really means, as he goes on to suggest, that he gave all his "belongings," his material possessions (3298-3301). He cannot give his total allegiance since he sees in Clara "a Power as absolute" (3306). Born to be a slave (3323), he finds himself caught between two masters. One, he says, is a "despot" and the other an "enchantress" (3319), but each term is an exaggeration and therefore an illusion. On the other hand, his designation for them has a certain validity, since each "power" has exploited him. The Virgin has demanded the rigid commitment of his soul, and

significantly the soul's tribute, so that quite literally she has fed on his soul's desire, ravished him, as her title suggests. Clara has ravished him in quite a different manner; as an enchantress, she has fed on his body's desire (Browning later says that "caterpillar-like" she fed her fill; 4037-4039). Both his masters, or mistresses, La Ravissante and Clara, manipulate him for their own purposes.

Miranda, then, is understandably indignant that his efforts to please the Virgin have not met with recognition: "'Well, where is the reward? what promised fruit /Of sacrifice in peace, content?'" (3345-3346). Yet he is oblivious of the fact that he measures his efforts materially: "'My soul retained its treasure; but my purse /Lightened itself with much alacrity'" (3343-3344); "'I pay . . . Earth's tribute-money'" (3370-3371). The Virgin is a religious symbol which requires spiritual belief rather than earthly tribute, but Miranda is loathe to perceive that. He does, however, after considering the possibility of insufficient faith and the past miracles performed by La Ravissante, move towards a deeper insight into his predicament. He still maintains the value of his sacrifices, but as usual he over-values their significance; despite their artificiality, they seemed to him to be "real enough" (3455). But if his gifts gain him no reward, he considers that he would "dawdle out [his] days" at Clairvaux in "mock love"--which outwardly professes to give freely, while inwardly wishing it dared refuse (3464)--in "Mock worship" and in "mock superiority" (3462-3469). If at last he seems to recognize the falsehood in his situation, it is but a momentary

insight, for the desire to gain "health of mind," "youth renewed" and peaceful co-existence with his "Opposing potentates" (3456-3462) proves decisive. He will demonstrate his faith, even though in wondering what "act" will prove its sufficiency (3475) he reverts to his preoccupation with external show.

Finally, the slave aspires to be masterful, to decide himself what to do, and to save the world from profane ignorance at the same time: "'I solve the riddle, I persuade mankind'" (3486). His excitement as he considers the possible consequences of his proof of faith leads him into further self-delusionment, as he attempts an inevitably hopeless effort of self-assertion. His willingness to accept without question the fulfilment of his proposed miracle is fed by the combination of his belief in previous miracles, his overwhelming urge to cease his inner conflict, and his concept of the Virgin's literal role as Queen of Angels--since "in a picture" she is surrounded by them (3514-3516). The catalogue of possible results which he imagines for himself removes other considerations. In his eagerness, he fails to realize that he is making his faith more important than its object, the Virgin, which is an act of pride. He summons her angels in order "to prove indubitable faith" (3517), failing to remember Christ's admonishment of the devil (the second temptation), that he should not tempt God, and failing to perceive that faith and proof are contradictory. He makes a show of wanting benefit for others, for France and for Clara, but benefit for them is benefit for him, for his fame, for his social status and for his peace of mind. Having always been the slave of circumstances and subject

to the will of others, he is ironically, in his effort to be master, a slave to his own fanciful impulses.

There is a perverse rationality, a misdirected logic, in Miranda's thoughts. Given his religious training, his impulsive and intemperate behaviour, his excessive feelings for his mother and the transference of these to La Ravissante, the support of the clergy, his love for Clara, and his lack of intellectual discrimination, his conclusion is understandable. Therefore Browning declares him sane: "Such being the conditions of his life, /Such end of life was not irrational" (3604-3605). It has, of course, been Browning's purpose to expose and to satirize these conditions as much as to explain Miranda's reaction to them.

The religious element is central to Miranda's behaviour and self-deception, and in section three both the church's reinforcement of his eccentricities and Browning's critical attitude to this support are made clear. Because Miranda was "a stupid soul," he needed a guide (2887), and Browning eulogizes his friend, Milsand, as an exemplar for this role. But Miranda turned to La Ravissante (2947-2949), and the priest and nun who tend his "soul-disease" (3029) bring "dogma in the bottle," not "fresh distillery of faith" (3033-3034). This opposition between "dogma" and "faith" is sufficient to indicate Browning's feelings, but his satire becomes still more pointed. He reports the story of Luc de la Maison Rouge to show that the church's own records require Miranda and Clara to separate: "'Not a step /Nearer till hands be washed and purified!'" (3102-3103). But this advice was not enforced. "Somehow," Browning continues with macabre irony, "gloves were drawn o'er dirt and all, /And

practice with the Church procured thereby" (3108-3109). The priest and nun left Clairvaux "with heaviness of heart," but also "each palm well crossed with coin" (3115-3116). Miranda will not compound his sin, "but by gifts--prepare /His soul the better for contrition" (3119-3120).

The Church, then, acquiesces in Miranda's sin, in order to receive his wealth. He is frequently moved to help the poor and unfortunate, but these are "as spillings of the golden grist /On either side the hopper" (3150-3151). The main stream pours into a sack "held wide and close /By Father of the Mission . . . /And Mother of the Convent" (3153-3155).

The Church profits from Miranda's absorption of the doctrine which its priests had taught him, "'Pain to the body--profit to the soul'" (2519), and in doing so supports his confusion of material and spiritual wealth.

Not only does the Church exploit him directly, but also his cousins use his religious fears for their purposes. They arrange for his mother's bedroom, her "death-chamber," to be "tricked with trappings . . . /Skulls, cross-bones" (2572-2573), effecting a horrid scene of medieval morality, whose ominous atmosphere is designed to play upon his intemperate emotions. Even the priest who accuses him of causing his mother's death has, the narrator hints, taken his orders from the cousins (2382-2386). And their deceit is further implied by a theatrical metaphor: "All things thus happily performed to point, /No wonder at success commensurate" (2446-2447).

The other major force to play upon Miranda is Clara, who also reinforces his ill-conceived activities and is judged by Browning accordingly. Her design, however, is less malicious than the cousins', since her deception is directed only towards her survival, and her behaviour

may be said to illustrate the art of self-preservation in untoward circumstances. From the outset of her relationship with Miranda in part two, she plays a studied part, initially winning his sympathy by taking a "statued stand" of martyrdom with a careful mixture of self-effacement and self-control--"half timidity, composure half" (1543-1550). After she has successfully aroused his love, by hiding the soil (she is married) under a carpet, like some hashish-man seducing a novice, she removes "the preliminary lie," assured that Miranda is won (1641-1657). The revealment is necessary because she is "Loaded with debts" and "needs must bring /Her soul to bear assistance from a friend" (1702-1703), so that her deceit is the result of social necessity. Later, in part four, in her speech after Miranda's death, she reveals how she has treated him as a child, her "truant little boy," in actuality being a mother to him, despite the "mock disguise of mistress" which held them together (3690-3697). She understands his infantile imaginings and would have indulged his desire to fly, as she had presumably indulged other fanciful impulses, holding him tight while he pretended to fly, and dropping him onto her knees instead of onto the ground (3698-3709). The key to her artifice, however, lies in the manner in which she deceived Miranda into believing he was master. She made him rebuild Clairvaux, thinking it was his inspiration, and she used to busy him with tasks, while pretending that he worked for her surprise (3710-3714): "'What weariness to me will work become /Now that I need not seem surprised again!'" (3715-3716). At this point the relevance of Browning's earlier comments about the face which reflects whoever looks at it (850-859) and about the slave who yet

"aspires to dominate" (875), becomes clear.

Browning finally describes Clara as a caterpillar, an image which evocatively and critically characterizes her parasitical relationship with Miranda:

. . . settled on Miranda, how she sucked,
Assimilated juices, took the tint,
Mimicked the form and texture of her food! (4055-4057)

She has "just one instinct,--that of growth" (4036) and believed simply in her "own birthright to sustain /Existence" (4099-4100). In this, of course, her artifice is triumphant and her victory over the others who would feed off Miranda is particularly praised by Browning (4105-4113). In fact, she alone among the "masks" in his history claims his respect, though his judgement of her is subtle and carefully measured. Morally, she is to be criticized because she did not aspire (4017-4019). Aesthetically, however, she appeals to the artist's preference for completion. She is a Meissonier, beside Miranda's Blake (4024-4025). On a limited scale, as a miniature with finesse of detail and completeness of design, she can be admired, because her design in life is completed, her ends are achieved. But her ends are selfish, and therefore on any more universal, aesthetic or moral, scale, she is inadequate. Her love in particular is not to be praised, because it is self-interested. Real love, Browning says, regards and embraces truth even at its own expense (4117-4118). On the other hand, she is still better than the cousins and the clergy; beside "the velvet green and puce /Of caterpillar" the latter figure as some "scarabaeus . . . a-trundling dung" (4122-4129).

The narrator's overt judgements in part four cause critical problems. As Philip Drew says, "it appears that Browning is first the puppet-master and then the external examiner, awarding marks to the characters in accordance with a predetermined schedule."¹⁸ Drew rightly points out that Browning uses his master-images to unify the poem and to link his two roles, but Drew does not make clear that Browning's attitude to his characters is always apparent. Miranda's limitations of mind (3998) are obvious from the account of his birth in part two; and Clara's position as "The medium article; if ruddy-marked /With iron-mould . . . clean at least /From poison-speck of rot and purulence" (1779-1781) has been clear from her introduction into the story. Browning is both the story-teller and the moralist throughout. His point in part four that even "in pettier love /The nice eye can distinguish grade and grade" (4120-4121), is simply a continuation of his earlier concern "to recognize /Distinctions" (246-247), whether about violins, nightcaps or human behaviour; and his judgements in part four are the culmination of his ironic undermining of conventional generalizations and deceiving surfaces. In terms of social appearances, Clara is most to blame for Miranda's distress, but in terms of underlying avarice and deceit she is, while still culpable, less to blame than the others who take advantage of his weaknesses. While this distinction has been implied already by the presentation of the story, and by Clara's confrontation with the cousins, it is consistent for the narrator to make his thoughts on the matter explicit.

Drew's defence of Browning's moralizing, that judgements are "kept

fluid," that the poem "mimics the situation in real life, where moral judgements determine our view of events at the same time as events are shaping our moral standards," is an excellent account of the poem's total effect.¹⁹ But the additional comment should be made that all shaping of standards and of events is openly controlled by the narrator. He knows from the outset where his argument and narration is headed, despite the spontaneity of his conversation (which gives the poem realism and authenticity); and for this reason the poem must be regarded as didactic.

Browning shows in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country that he can narrate a story with geniality and with subtlety of detail, but the poem's success is limited by its length and its loose structuring. Since the language and syntax are, in keeping with the relaxed mood of the narrator, simpler and easier to follow than Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau or Fifine at the Fair, the poem can be read relatively quickly--Arthur Symonds says "it is perhaps the easiest to read" of Browning's works,²⁰ though this judgement is zealous. The increased ease of reading helps the reader immensely and the narrator's tangential remarks are always related in some way to central themes and images, but many have only tenuous relationships and are simply continued too long. The mixture of moralizing and narration, of character analysis and character dramatization, is consistent throughout and the reader cannot complain of the intrusions and comment which conclude part four. Authorial control can, however, be conveyed more subtly and equally effectively without this kind of narration, and therefore The Inn Album, which follows this poem, is more successful for the modern reader.

The virtues of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country should not, of course, be ignored as a result of this preference. Browning's interest in the subtleties of the human mind are as evident as ever, and he presumably felt obliged to effect this loose structure because of the sensational subject-matter and the satirical tone he wanted to exploit. The poem's purpose and effect is misunderstood if the reader complains, as Roma King does, that the narrator "has no functional role" in the story he tells.²¹ As in a dramatic monologue, the narrator subsumes the poem's structure within his own character, except that here the irony is not unconsciously directed at himself; it is consciously directed at the social milieu which he depicts. Browning's use of this kind of control enables him to pursue his interest in deception in quite a different manner from that in dramatic monologues. Most important is the social interchange, the effect of wilful deceit on others, but of almost equal importance is the discrimination between levels of reality and between degrees of deception. Roma King says that the poem is marred as a psychological study because Miranda is abnormal.²² But his abnormality, his lack of intellectual perception and his confusion of literal appearances with symbolic beliefs, is a matter only of degree. He is simply following through to a logical, if perversely logical, conclusion the conditions of belief and behaviour imposed upon him by his social and intellectual betters. Everybody mistakes appearances for reality, even the narrator's friend, with her white cotton night-cap country.

Roma King also writes disapprovingly of the narrator's "parlor argument" with his companion, where he counters "her more 'idealistic'

view with his more 'realistic,' insisting that red cotton night caps better depict the general human condition than do white ones."²³ Again, this is a seriously limited explanation of the poem's intention and effect. It would be more accurate to say that the narrator counters one level of reality with another, and in this connection there is an interplay between metaphor and literal event which provides one of the best features of the poem. Towards the end of part two, when, after hesitating, Miranda abruptly joins Clara, Browning employs a swimming metaphor:

. . . one bold splash
 Into the mid-shame, and the shiver ends,
 Though cramp and drowning may begin perhaps. (1933-1935)

The image is obvious enough, and insufficiently striking to command special attention, at least initially, but in part three, when Miranda precipitately jumps into the Seine, this metaphor suddenly becomes a harsh reality. The profusion of fire imagery in part three has already been demonstrated, and the turf and towers metaphor similarly engages in this movement from image to fact. In this manner, Browning prepares for events through anticipatory images, a useful structural device in such a long undertaking. The narrator's concern to apprehend some of the multitude of "thoughts which give the act significance" (3280), and even the feeling behind the thought (2834-2835)--an idea perhaps suggested, like the nightcaps, by Carlyle²⁴--is also part of the penetration into various levels of psychological reality, which is an insistent preoccupation in most of Browning's work.

Roma King's concluding comment on Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is:

that Browning "comes closer in this poem perhaps than in any other to seeing man as a victim of his environment."²⁵ "Environment," however, is too vague. Miranda is a victim of his own incompetence and inherited nature, as well as his learning and his greedy acquaintances. The latter--his mother, his cousins and the clergy--are also the victims both of their inner desire for aggrandizement and of their social training which emphasizes wealth and rich display. In keeping with the poem's thematic interest in deceptive surfaces, Browning sees man as a victim of the deception inherent in values and beliefs which stress superficial show, the emblem itself rather than what it connotes. Man falls such a victim because of his own limitations, because of the ease with which he can deceive himself and because of the selfish desires which promote this self-deception.

Browning certainly urges the ugly truth of man's nature underneath apparently pure appearances, but in view of his fascination with the rationality and sanity behind it all, it is difficult to agree with Roma King that he "displays here a disillusionment which sees life as more red than white."²⁶ The narrator in the poem begins with no illusions and therefore he cannot be disillusioned, although his companion might be after his story. The narrator, and therefore Browning, carries throughout a clear sense of the reality of the situation. He is angry with those who wilfully exploit human weaknesses. He is realistic rather than disillusioned, with a fine moral discrimination which recognizes distinctions and shades rather than viewing life as red or white, or more one than the other.

NOTES

¹See W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), pp. 374-375, and B. Litzinger and D. Smalley, eds., Browning: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 378-397.

²William Allingham: A Diary, eds. H. Allingham and D. Radford (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 225.

³The Diary of Alfred Domett, 1872-1885, ed. E. A. Horsman (London: O.U.P., 1953), p. 67.

⁴De Vane, p. 374.

⁵A. Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, new edition (London: Dent, 1906), p. 183.

⁶Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 189.

⁷See Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 325, for an example of the way Browning subordinates incident to character.

⁸See Drew, p. 324.

⁹King, p. 192.

¹⁰Drew erroneously says *La Ravissante* is first introduced in section two (p. 324).

¹¹Drew, p. 323.

¹²T. Carlyle, The French Revolution, Vol. II (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896), 250. See also Charlotte Watkins, "Browning's 'Red Cotton Night-Cap Country' and Carlyle," Victorian Studies, 7 (June 1964), 359-374.

¹³Barbara Melchiori briefly discusses this incident with reference to Browning's biography, in "Robert Browning's Courtship and the Mutilation of Monsieur Léonce Miranda," Victorian Poetry, 5 (1967), 303-304.

¹⁴J. G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (1922; New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 410. See also The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature, ed. P.

Harvey (1937; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), for Attis and Cybele. Catullus' poem based on the Attis legend is a possible source for Browning's knowledge of the story; there were several copies of Catullus' works in his library. See The Browning Collections (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 1913), p. 87.

¹⁵King, p. 191. It is the third temptation according to Luke 4: 1-13, the second according to Matthew 4: 1-11.

¹⁶Drew, p. 323.

¹⁷It is true, as Philip Drew says, that Browning makes no direct comment on Miranda's motives, but Drew's statement, which uses this fall of the "tent" as an example, that "even the imagery allows some doubt to remain about Browning's own attitude" (p. 327), requires some qualification. Browning does not judge Miranda's motives, but he does judge the quality of his actions, and in this instance the description is not ambiguous about the nature of the "tent" as a deception. It is a "tawdry tent," and its artistic embroidery--"cobweb-work" and "betinseled stitchery" (2436)--implies the artifice of its superficial glitter, its illusory and impermanent quality. Browning's attitude towards Miranda's limitations is always clear.

¹⁸Drew, p. 331.

¹⁹Drew, p. 331.

²⁰Symons, p. 185.

²¹King, p. 191.

²²King, p. 190.

²³King, p. 192.

²⁴Cf. T. Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, ed. C. F. Harrold (New York: Odyssey, 1937), p. 143: "... existence was all a Feeling, not yet shaped into a Thought" (Bk. II, ch. v).

²⁵King, p. 193.

²⁶King, pp. 192-193.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INN ALBUM: CIVILIZATION AND THE ARTIFICES OF CYNICISM

Like Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, The Inn Album has been repeatedly attacked for its sordid and implausible content. Reviewing the poem in 1875, J. A. Symonds imitated "local-newspaper language," in what he thought was the best method for retelling the "vulgar, repulsive, and improbable story."¹ In 1956, H. C. Duffin repeated Symonds' strictures: "The story . . . is so wildly absurd, its happenings, relations and motives so inexplicable and incredible, that to re-tell it would be a waste of time."² If a plot outline is to stand for the poem, this view is undoubtedly correct, and a most effective reductio ad absurdum of the poem's story can be found in Henry James' review for The Nation.³ But it is as misleading to emphasize the plot in The Inn Album as it is in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country. Such an approach to this poem quite ignores the subtle and gradual revelation of character, the suspense about interwoven relationships, and the depths of resourcefulness which are probed in the three protagonists. For this reason, the importance of Philip Drew's insight into the poem's kinship with a Morality or Masque of Vice and Virtue cannot be overstressed.⁴

It is also important to notice that such a description does not deny the poem's realism. Drew says Browning's success lies in the fact that "his characters perform what is almost a Masque of Vice and Virtue,

enacting a basic ethical conflict, and yet the poem is not in the least abstract in effect."⁵ As usual, Browning is interested in psychological drama, and the concrete effect of the poem will bear further examination. It is true, as Drew points out, that "the characters, like the reader, begin in ignorance of the chains which bind them together, and their suspicions grow as the reader's grow."⁶ It is also true that each character, like the reader, begins in ignorance of the true moral quality of the others, and part of the poem's achievement is to develop a gradual and inexorable revelation of these qualities.

Because of the limited authorial intrusion, the reader is required to follow the argument and case made by each character in order to determine for himself what is false; he is thus forced, because of the suspension of vital information until the last possible moment, to experience directly something of the dilemma of the Youth.⁷ It is the Youth, as Drew says, who "stands in the position of the chooser: he is the Soul in need of guidance for whom the Lord and the Lady are both contending."⁸ Browning in a sense interweaves three monologues (a fourth, the Cousin, is peripherally involved also); the reader is required to digest each and discriminate between them. Truth is finally clear and the correct judgement obvious, but, despite the melodramatic appearance of the violent conclusion, Browning develops a complexity of character in each instance which remains to the end to cloud all virtue, and which prevents any of the exaggerated simplicity inherent in melodrama. The Masque-like structure supports the contrived plot, and the Miltonic overtones, noted by Drew, add typological inferences which reinforce the moral debate

and universalize the circumstances. The complexity of motive and subtlety of characterization add a thematically rich fabric of deception which effects a typically Browningsque realism.

One of the remarkable features of the realism is the antithesis between the "Shabby-gentée!" parlour room and the country outside, which Browning elaborates in the opening scene. In the narrator's most extended entry into the poem, the "Vulgar flat smooth respectability" of the inn is contrasted with "the burst of landscape surging in" (43-44). The description of the landscape forms one of Browning's finest scenes, where the careful infusion of movement, light, stillness and haze dissolves the solidity into a shimmering impressionism:

He leans into a living glory-bath
Of air and light where seems to float and move
The wooded watered country, hill and dale
And steel-bright thread of stream, a-smoke with mist,
A-sparkle with May morning, diamond drift
O' the sun-touched dew. (50-55)

Only a village disturbs, albeit slightly, the natural solitude and peace:

Except the red-roofed patch
Of half a dozen dwellings that, crept close
For hill-side shelter, make the village-clump,
This inn is perched above to dominate--
Except such sign of human neighbourhood,
(And this surmised rather than sensible)
There's nothing to disturb absolute peace,
The reign of English nature--which means art
And civilized existence. Wildness' self
Is just the cultured triumph. (55-64)

It is nature which supplies civilization and culture rather than man--
Tourists have "vulgarized things comfortably smooth" (33). Nature, as a

supplier of art, is opposed to man's sentimental pretentiousness, which the narrator has observed in the parlour's cluttered walls (34-41), and which he is about to satirize in the "lovers of the picturesque" (73). Nature's art is without artifice, unpretentious and spontaneous, and it contrasts with man's exercises in deception, his vain attempts to capture its beauty in "some pencil-drawing" (81).

The landscape, however, is more than a beautiful scene; it contains life:

Presently
 Deep solitude, be sure, reveals a Place
 That knows the right way to defend itself:
 Silence hems round a burning spot of life. (64-67)

Secure within the silence of nature, the "burning spot" is protected from abuse, from prying, vulgar eyes, but life means man, and man inexorably intrudes into the scene:

Now, where a Place burns, must a village brood,
 And where a village broods, an inn should boast--
 Close and convenient: here you have them both. (68-70)

The narrator thus skilfully returns to his point of departure, and in doing so he creates a remarkable accumulative effect with the movement from "burns" to "broods" to "boast." This progression, emphasized by the alliteration, combines an Augustan balance in the phrasing of the lines with an imagistic penetration in meaning. As man intrudes into nature further, he simultaneously and paradoxically removes himself from it. When life burns, it is spontaneous, silent and natural; when the

village broods, life is still silent and therefore in contact with the silent world around it, but now out of harmony with that world, emotional, unhappy and ominous; and when the inn boasts, life is verbal, artificial, asserting its pride, its independence from its surroundings, its conceited existence. The movement is one from purity to sin. Roma King says the country is "no longer the symbol of natural innocence,"⁹ but if he means the landscape scene, and he presumably does since he refers to its "idyllic atmosphere," it is difficult to agree with his comment. Browning clearly implies that man, insofar as he indulges in deceit and selfishness, separates himself from "The reign of English nature--which means art /And civilized existence."

Having described the juxtaposition of man and nature, the narrator withdraws, apart from some brief accounts of movement and scene, which frequently include pointed epithets, and so allows the characters to speak for themselves, thereby revealing their qualities and their design. In scene one (there are eight sections or scenes), which introduces the Youth and the Lord, a reasonable balance of sympathy is maintained for each. The Youth is designated as a "polished snob" (143) by the narrator, and he acknowledges the notion himself (277). He is a "clumsy giant" (255), lacking the refined polish of the elder man, in speech as in appearance. His metaphors are mundane and his structures follow well worn patterns and phrases: "point me to one soul beside /In the wide world I care one straw about!" (263-264). By contrast, if the Lord employs a proverbial cliché, he varies it sufficiently to restore interest and vigour: "still silk purse /Roughs finger with some bristle sow-ear-born!"

(397-398). Aware of the low social background he springs from, the Youth is self-conscious about his lack of linguistic skill (258-263, 286). He proffers, however, a simple goodwill which wants to disregard his companion's debt. Although this generosity is that of the economically secure, the Lord's accusation that he merely postures as a hero (236) may have some validity. His material well-being, for instance, is quite taken for granted, and it means the offer is a gesture, since the money itself is of little consequence to him. Though he says the amount will meet the debt of gratitude which he owes the Lord, the latter might justifiably feel aggrieved that such a debt is so effortlessly met. The Youth's money seems to give him a sense of personal security which has dulled his responses to ordinary excitements. His match with his cousin will increase his wealth even further, and the prospect of owning the beautiful scenery around him is treated with a lack of enthusiasm which hints at an underlying complacency: "'Fine enough country for a fool like me /To own, as next month I suppose I shall!'" (125-126). The house and lands are to him a "plump-bodied kite" which will pull him "Along life's pleasant meadow" (340-342). His materialistic insensitivity even leads him to suggest that a Correggio might be suitable repayment for the gambling debt, a thought which provokes his companion's anger. The Youth is well-meaning, but he does not understand the Lord's aristocratic pride, his (as yet) realistic penetration into motives. Indeed, the Youth's own history, his rushing off to isolation, to build a sea-side tower in Dalmatia after some wounding experience (295), implies an impulsive tendency towards exaggerated magnanimous gestures. It also implies

a certain naiveté which is present again in his continual subservience to his companion. He is, he says, a "poor disciple" of this man who is his "master" (154-156), and in view of the Satanic associations which later gather around the Lord, an increasing irony develops in the Youth's Biblical terms. Of course, his humility is attractive, but there is an uncomfortable feeling, caused mainly by his straight-forward and impulsive manner, that it accompanies a lack of mature perception.

The Youth's admiration of the Lord offsets many of the unpleasant overtones to the latter's officious and imperious tone, which is seen particularly in the opening lines: "'That oblong book's the Album; hand it here!'" (1); "'Open the window, we burn daylight, boy!'" (12). Since the Youth accepts the commands without quarrel, the reader tends at this stage to do the same. The narrator twice asserts the Lord's refinement (144, 224), and in the face of his financial loss, to the amount of ten thousand pounds, he preserves a proud dignity and stoical calm--"'You man of marble!'" (221) says the Youth. It is apparent that the elder man is an inveterate gambler, that he deliberately engineered this game as his last chance to fleece the Youth of his money (160-207), and that his unsavoury reputation makes him unwanted in domestic circles (176). But his social ease and independent attitude tend to mitigate his more sinister purposes. Even when it is clear that his independence is really based not on noble principle but on the social fear that his ignominious defeat and inability to pay his debt might inadvertently slip out in the late-night intimacy of some smoking room, his attitude elicits not simply criticism of his selfishness, but also recognition and acceptance of his

knowledge about human behaviour. At this point, his attitude suggests a reasonable scepticism or realism about human weakness which affirms rather than denies his social skill and plausibility.

His outburst of sarcasm at the Youth's mention of the Correggio painting is also ambivalent. On the one hand, he gains approval for his rejection of the distasteful proposal, but on the other hand, the contempt which he exhibits towards the Youth's social background is too real to be lightly dismissed: "'father's apron still /Sticks out from son's court-vesture . . .'" (396-397). Of course, he quickly suppresses his response and the incident remains as a momentary slipping of his social mask, though how much the revelation is crucial or important to his character is not yet certain.

As he restores his equanimity, he demonstrates an easy grace which is ingratiating--"'Well, neither I nor you mean harm at heart! . . .'" (399)--but which also, as he proceeds, contains the elements of his verbal artifice, his techniques for social manipulation. He first mixes praise of his protégé with praise of himself, so that the second is acceptable because of the first: "'The polisher needs precious stone no less /Than precious stone needs polisher'" (405-406). Next, he mixes self-depreciation with self-praise, as he asserts an unselfish wisdom which wishes to help the Youth in order to atone for misusing another "stone of price," himself (414). He devalues his outward development ("cut awry /Or left opaque"; 417-418), while never denying the value of the raw material (415, 419). This move, which acknowledges his failure to produce any external sign of success, while maintaining an independent

inner quality which yet remains ("I'm nobody--or rather, look that same --/I'm--who I am--and know it"; 420-421), subtly prepares for his final ploy, which is the open-confessional technique of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau. He admits his somewhat insidious design on the Youth: "I end with--well, you've hit it!--"This Boy's cheque /For just as many thousands as he'll spare!"" (426-427). Having gained his listener's confidence with the account of his failure to develop his latent brilliance, he concludes with this disarming frankness and with a lightly comic touch, which in the context of his speech and through a neatly balanced rhetorical flourish ("The first I could, and would not; your spare cash /I would, and could not"; 428-429) draws sympathy for his further failure instead of criticism for his initial inertia. He confesses his ignoble intentions without fear of recrimination, he placates the Youth's objections to his paying the debt, he restores social harmony, and he even hints indirectly at a noble stoicism--to counterpoint his ignoble intentions--in his accepting the consequences of his actions. The Lord is verbally adroit and elusive, though there is no reason yet to suspect him of anything more than aristocratic superciliousness and an intention to exploit the social gaucherie of a young millionaire.

In scene two, the Youth and the Lord confide in each other their unsuccessful love affairs. They do this while walking to the village station, and the narrator takes another opportunity of praising the natural scene, which contrasts again with man's bourgeois pretentiousness, now exhibited in the Youth's cousin who regards her recently

acquired piano as a "brand-new bore" (507). The inequitable distribution of wealth, which means she has an excellent piano while her teacher, a musician of considerable talent, has to practise on a table-top (517), reinforces the Lord's previous anger at the Youth's materialistic insensitivity to artistic matters.

The Youth continues, as before, to praise his master's ability, though the idea of the Lord's aching with love, a preposterous notion to the Youth, promotes a momentary awakening to the possibility that he may be mistaken in his attitude: "'My sort of ache? No, no! and yet--perhaps! /All comes of thinking you superior still'" (573-574). He also continues in his tactlessness, hopelessly muddling his references to the Lord's age (604-607), but as he talks of his lost love his halting speech conveys the deep-rooted intensity of his passion, a passion which combines the anguish of love's loss with the fury of frustration at his foolishness and inaction:

"Fool to be so meek,
So humble,--such a coward rather say!
Fool, to adore the adorer of a fool!
. . . I grind
My teeth, that bite my very heart, to think--
To know I might have made that woman mine
But for the folly of the coward--know--
Or what's the good of my apprenticeship
This twelvemonth to a master in the art?
Mine--had she been mine--just one moment mine
For honour, for dishonour--anyhow,
So that my life, instead of stagnant" (1039-1054)

The irony in their respective affairs, which the elder man is quick to point out, is that each acted as the other should have (1068), yet their present attitudes mark quite different natures. The Youth blames

himself and still loves (569-570), the Lord blames the woman as well as himself and hates her for not giving him a chance to repair his error (823-825). If the Youth's nature is the more noble it is also the more rash and compulsive. The Lord is complex and calculating by contrast, and he enforces a more careful consideration of his character.

The Lord's earlier postulate of the difference between his outer roughness and inner value (415-419) establishes an ambivalence, a discrepancy between personality and identity, which he sustains in this scene, and which becomes a device to mitigate his wrong-doing. The distinction enables him particularly to justify his role in the affair with the country-parson's daughter and even to retain for himself a measure of sympathy, or at least the benefit of doubt, in the face of his irresponsibility. In his previous affairs, the Lord had exercised a command of social-deception, telling his women lies which they disbelieved, but which they required as "their decent due" (716). Such lies are artifices by which the women deceive themselves into thinking better of their behaviour than they ought. But the parson's daughter knew nothing of social masks and believed his false antics: "'No mock-heroics but seemed natural /To her'" (722-723). Because she herself was "true, devoted, constant," she thought these qualities were found in all people (719-721); she misjudged him because of her own natural virtue. Ironically, the Lord made the same error. He thought her heart "Must correspond in folly just as far /Beyond the common" as her face was beautiful (723-726), and when he revealed his falseness to her, her horrified reaction was an "all-unsuspected revelation" to him (741). He acknowledges the irony,

which since it is to his detriment aids the plausibility of his point of view, and which also helps to explain his conduct as an act of understandable misjudgement. He was, to his mind, simply behaving in the manner expected of him. He was also behaving as a collector of beautiful objects, with the collector's instinct for possession which invariably develops into greed. Similarly, he acknowledges this instinct as part of a pattern of behaviour which, because recognized and appropriately devalued by him, is an acceptable, if reprehensible, pattern of the society rake. Again, he was only acting as others would: "'It seemed as though the whole world . . . /Would break bounds to contest my prize with me'" (676-678).

But the Lord is unconscious of the cynicism which he reveals in telling of this experience. If the woman exhibited an imperceptive naivety towards social intercourse, he certainly showed a thorough misunderstanding of human goodness and of the severe shock in disillusionment. What was the Lord's realistic perception of human weakness in scene one becomes his cynical misapprehension of human virtue in scene two. From now on, his verbal techniques may be regarded as the artifices of cynicism. With this development, his accusations that the Youth's humility is "mock-modesty" (617) and that his youthful assurance is "self-complacency" (610) may be doubted, and as the Lord's increasingly apparent cynicism separates him from the Youth, the reader is forced to reconsider the moral nature of both men.

The elder man thinks his culpable behaviour towards the young lady is offset by his offer of reparation in marriage. Unable to observe

an ironic justice in the scorning of his one attempt at honesty, he courts sympathy for being the victim of a hard, unforgiving mistress who sent him on the path of destruction. His attitude, a mixture of hate for himself and for her, is plausible, since he appears to be sincere in regarding her not only as the supreme "prize," but also as a magnificent source of inspiration who might have given purpose and impetus to his life (809-816). What he misses, and what Browning builds into his speech, is the thorough selfishness of his professed love. In retrospect, he hopes he meant "to do /All requisite for such a rarity" when he had time "To learn requirement" (693-696), but even amidst the present reminiscence and remorse he evinces no understanding of what the "requirement" might be. His bitter resentment of the parson whom she married--"'some smug crop-haired smooth-chinned sort /Of curate-creature'" (755-756)--and his contempt for her "Respectable" and "countrified" happiness clearly expose his complete lack of consideration for her feelings or dignity.

More importantly, his skill in minimizing the degree of his sin demonstrates the manner in which he employs verbal artifice to obscure truth and to gain himself a sympathetic hearing. He establishes a cleverly contrived ambiguity about the exact nature of his experience with the parson's daughter by combining his collector's attitude with a pun on "lie":

"There lay
My marvel, there my purse more light by much
Because of its late lie-expenditure." (733-735)

He has just mentioned the lies he told to his previous women, and the superficial effect of this comment is to suggest that his crime was simply one of verbal deceit. He later reinforces this effect in a similar attempt to diminish the gravity of the incident by saying that she, as the pursued game, was frightened away by "clap /Of boyish hands" (783-784). Obviously, the implication is that her reaction was exaggerated and unfair to his intentions. However, his comments also hint at the more serious enterprise of a premature marital consummation:

"'Marry me!'
Or rather, 'We are married: when, the rite?' (730-731)

Again, he exploits an ambiguity, depending on what is meant by rite, but the combined effect of "We are married," "There lay /My marvel" (my italics), "late lie-expenditure" (my italics), and his later reference to her "Magdalen's adventure" (802), strongly indicate a sexual relationship. His skill is such that if he is understood superficially, his crime is verbal only and therefore he is exonerated because it is not serious; alternatively, if his ambiguity is understood properly, his language attains a comic subtlety whose cynical wit and social sophistication glide over the deed equally effectively. This episode is also a tribute to Browning's handling of the sexual problem. Prevented by the social attitudes of his time from presenting the matter explicitly, he exploits covert and ambiguous references as an aspect of character, and this, of course, is an excellent solution to his difficulty.

Despite the underlying elements of bitterness and selfishness in the Lord's speech, he yet, to be fair, cannot be totally condemned by the

reader. The Youth's reaction is indicative and he clearly is not perturbed by his master's account, though the woman concerned sounds suspiciously like his own lost beauty. Also, the Lord retains the appearance of fair and honest judgement because he is willing to disparage himself as well as blame the girl. His open confession of his faults, or some of them, anticipates and therefore lessens criticism. The mixture of frustration at the knowledge of his own error in not recognizing the girl's real value (782-783) and outraged resentment at her refusal to allow him a second chance (823-825), and his mixture of helplessness in the increasing degradation of his life and his scorn for her naive respectability, still maintain an equivocation about the depth and degree of his moral nature. In one sense, he flaunts the wilful naughtiness of an outrageous, but likeable because plausible and clever rogue; in another, he exhibits several malicious attitudes which imply more sinister depths within his personality, and which deny the superior quality of his inner self which he posited in scene one.

The third scene introduces the Cousin and the Lady. It is quickly apparent that the Cousin is the Youth's fiancée, and towards the end of the scene, when it is discovered that the Lady is married to a clergyman, it is fairly obvious that she is the parson's daughter whom the Lord talked of in scene two. The dominating effect of this scene is the ironic contrast between the naive innocence of the Cousin and the worn experience of the Lady. Beside the careless gaiety of the younger woman, the elder (neither is old: "one young, /One very young"; 1086-1087) expresses a brooding intensity, but her ominous preoccupation with the calm

of death is not apprehended by the Cousin until the end of the scene. The Cousin, of course, is preoccupied with her own affair, with her prospective marriage and with the promise of happiness which she associates with the "fairy marriage-tree." Her youthful exuberance and hopeful anticipation form a striking antithesis to the Lady in this scene. Her entry at the conclusion of the poem again brings in the fresh naturalness which she radiates, and the antithesis which she provides then includes the tense apprehension of the frightful scene she is about to discover. By not actually including her reaction, Browning avoids any melodramatic exaggeration, while still retaining the poignant effect of her contrasting innocence. Since her part in the drama is small, though necessary (she is the catalyst who brings the other three together), she is primarily important in scene three for the additional point of view she provides on the Youth, and for the interest which she elicits for the Lady, who is "an angelic mystery" to her (1183). She reinforces for the reader the Youth's unsophisticated nature (1217-1218), and indirectly implies his indifference to natural beauty by noting his desire to fell the elm tree outside the inn as an example of his physical vigour. Her two most significant observations are that "He runs into extremes," and that "he wants /Someone to serve, something to do" (1225-1227). Both of these points have been noted also by the Lord. They are obviously crucial aspects of the Youth's character as Browning portrays it.

The Lady exhibits a grand dignity in this scene, with an underlying melancholy which is surprising in one so young. There is little difference in the ages of the two women, but there is a wide separation in

mood and attitude which is intriguing in its possibilities. The ironic misunderstanding of the Cousin when the Lady says she could dispense

"With all thought fair in feature, mine or no,
 Leave but enough of face to know me by--
 With all found fresh in youth except such strength
 As lets a life-long labour earn repose
 Death sells at just that price, they say;" (1169-1173)

emphasizes the disparity between them and is a measure of the depth of experience in the older woman. Also, the latter's beautiful appearance is contrary to her inner mood, and the Cousin believes only love could have nourished such loveliness (1308-1316). But beauty (in an image which the Cousin employs, though apparently without being aware of its broader implications) is "the prize-flower which dispenses eye /From peering into what has nourished root" (1309-1310). Beauty, because of its attractiveness may lead the eye to focus only on surface appearances and may therefore be an unwitting agent of deception. The Lord, for example, said of his lost prize that "her mere face surprised so much /That [he] stopped short there" (649-650); if there had been only a "little flaw," he would have "'peeped /Inside it, learned what soul inside was like'" (643-644). In scene three, the Cousin is shocked to discover that the Lady's soul seeks an undisturbed oblivion under the elm (1331-1335).

Scene four presents a dramatic confrontation between the Lord and the Lady which forms one of the highlights of the poem. Here, the Lord's social artifices are balked by the Lady's absolute refusal to believe anything he says. She regards him throughout as a trickster, and

enlists universal moral forces to augment her struggle against his evil (1410-1411). He retains, at least superficially (his pacing later hints at inner agitation; 1898), social ease, but even as he moves towards momentary sincerity, she will not concede one point. In this irony, as Arthur Symonds first pointed out, "lies the intensity of the situation."¹⁰ Roma King says they "talk at cross purposes,"¹¹ but that description is too weak for an encounter which develops all the fascinating irony and verbal manouvering of two monologuists who are each intent on asserting his own point of view. Such an encounter has all the elements of comedy, but the Lady's severity and stern morality render the situation too serious for that. The two, indeed, talk at cross purposes, and thereby dramatize something of the futile agony in proud obstinacy and selfish wheedling.

This scene advances the revelation of the Lord's nature and resourcefulness a step further. As he claims that the Lady has caused his ruin, and not he hers, he inadvertently discloses his real attitude towards the Youth. Far from desiring to polish the raw stone, he had "tightened hold" on this boy "as green as grass" in order to win his money, and the dissolute morality of his intention is ignored by his emphasis on the blow of his own defeat: "'the boy . . . buries me /In ruin who was sure to beggar him'" (1434-1435). His selfish obsession with his downfall and his blaming the Lady's fiendish charm for causing it are both a refusal to accept responsibility for his immoral behaviour and an inverted admiration of the Lady herself. He credits her with the sinister artifice of a femme fatale, and his description of her hair,

with its snake-like writhings, takes on the associations of Medusa:

"See
The low wide brow oppressed by sweeps of hair
Darker and darker as they coil and swathe
The crowned corpse-wanness . . ." (1445-1448)

He also regards her as having employed her artifice on the curate whom she married, thus landing her prize "the true artistic way" (1496). In attributing to her the same kind of deceitful and selfish design that he has himself, he can feel that he was simply beaten by a superior artificer, with his confident cynicism no longer threatened by her play of superior morality. His initial ploy, then, is to reduce her to his level of tactical scheming. His anxious desire to find some compensating factor in the parson--youth, riches (1605-1607), or even domestic happiness (1695-1697)--which would have induced her to marry the man, sustains this ploy, since such motivation on her part would allow the Lord to continue in his cynicism. To marry for advantage is an act he understands. When it is clear that she married in order to give herself away and that she married into hardship and squalor, not into riches and joy, he is shattered.

It is then his turn to profess disillusionment, as he changes his tactics and moves from admonishing her as a "woman-fiend" (1444) to calling on her angelic potential to redeem him from a life of sin. The two attitudes evince a paradox in his viewpoint rather than a contradiction, being extensions of the conflicting feelings which he expressed in scene two--an oscillation between self-vindication and recognition that she possesses a virtue which society women lack. In his self-depreciation and

admittance that she is right in her harsh judgement of him, he is very convincing, and his attempt yet again to win her has the air of humble sincerity. Momentarily, it seems, he is willing to reform, if she will commit herself to him. But there is a rhetorical subtlety even here which retains the impression of a controlled artifice. The repetition of her name, for example (1899, 1910, 1918, 2015), is an overt device, and when he says the devil had his "moment" (1909), the reader might well recall the continuing series of affairs which were implicit in his conversation with the Youth in scene two. Also the bitterness (1833) with which he confesses his guilt--"I abused you, I betrayed, /But doubted--never!" (1843-1844)--evinces his reluctance to concede the point, and he hastens to include criticism of her, that she did not love him--"I wronged love, /Am ruined,--and there was no love to wrong!" (1862-1863). But this additional attempt to include her in his denigration also fails, and he is at last forced to consider her virtue.

In his final plea, the Lord's arguments are skilfully handled, and in playing on the Lady's Christian belief and moral pride, he penetrates further into the true fibre of her character than he has so far. In recognizing her real worth, he comes closest to being sincere in his contrition, but he cannot apprehend the stubborn depths of her contempt for him. He calls on her to practise Christian charity--"God forgives: /Forgive you, delegate of God" (1899-1900)--he praises her justice, he hints at her pride--"Had you no fault? . . . /Wherefore did God exalt you?" (1919-1924)--he seeks her redemption (1930), he denies the validity of her marriage, which he says is a "mock marriage" with a "Man-mask"

(1974-1975), he urges the sincerity of his love which continues, he emphasizes, through adversity (1995-1997), and finally he very cleverly asserts the superficiality of what he has spoken--"love lies deeper than all words, /And not the spoken but the speechless love /Waits answer" (2012-2014). Any less resolute or more charitable woman than the Lady would assuredly have been swayed, but his underlying cynicism has missed a crucial point, her duty to her husband, which she is quick to notice, and to comment on:

"Ay, no barb's beneath
The gilded minnow here! You bid break trust,
This time, with who trusts me,--not simply bid
Me trust you, me who ruined but myself,
In trusting but myself!" (2026-2030)

In view of the expediency in his altering attitude to her and his selfish neglect of her husband in trying to win her again, the Lady is no doubt right to reject the Lord absolutely as she does. But perhaps she is too harsh in her contempt (his confessional technique still appeals strongly), and his hint at pride and self-righteousness is a convincing objection. Like the Youth who is seen earlier to be furious with his own foolishness, the Lady too is annoyed with her folly in previously trusting the Lord's lies--he is an "all-abject knave," she says, but she is a "perfect fool" (1556, 1791). Also like the Youth, she is a person of extreme reactions. Her first impulse when she discovered her ruin was to destroy herself (1561-1563), since how, she thought, could she avoid

"falling down
 From sin to sin until some depth were reached
 Doomed to the weakest by the wickedest
 Of weak and wicked human kind?" (1565-1568)

Her superlatives are indicative of the strength and depth of her feeling, and later when she tells how completely she trusted and believed the Lord (1868-1886), it is again clear that her reaction was extreme, to veer from absolute trust to absolute contempt. Indeed, it was the vigour of her contempt, she says, which saved her:

"Clear-sighted was I that who hurled contempt
 As I--thank God!--at the contemptible,
 Was scarce an utter weakling. Rent away
 By treason from my rightful pride of place,
 I was not destined to the shame below." (1577-1581)

The injured pride which was denied its rights and her implacable dignity sought punishment and restitution within the hard labour of the clergyman's parish. But there too she was made aware of man's coarse wretchedness:

"I teach the poor and learn, myself,
 That commonplace to such stupidity
 Is all-recondite. Being brutalized
 Their true need is brute-language, cheery grunts
 And kindly cluckings, no articulate
 Nonsense that's elsewhere knowledge." (1677-1682)

After four years, this life had become so intolerable that she was glad to leave it for a day, dreading her return (1796-1803). In a harsh indictment of human commonplace and small-mindedness, she "again saw earth pursue /Its narrow busy way amid small cares, /Smaller contentments, much weeds, some few flowers'" (1805-1807); but her seducer's

interruption broke the illusion that she could return and she again submits her soul--a failure, she says, because it lost its love--to the bounds she has chosen for it (1812-1817). In doing this, she believes she is pursuing the "high aim," which does not mistake falsehood for truth:

"Better have failed in the high aim, as I,
Than vulgarly in the low aim succeed
As, God be thanked, I do not! Ugliness
Had I called beauty, falsehood--truth, and you
--My lover!" (1823-1827)

She has done, then, what the narrator in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country says Clara ought to have done. This claim of the Lady's is a measure of an important difference from Clara: whereas Clara desired only to survive, the Lady cares not for survival, but for salvation, or if there is no salvation, then for death, rather than reduce her self-respect and dignity further:

"Purify my powers,
Effortless till some other world procure
Some other chance of prize! or, if none be,--
Nor second world no chance,--undesecrate
Die then this aftergrowth of heart, surmised
Where May's precipitation left June blank!" (1817-1822)

These are strong words which, with her mood in scene three, anticipate and make plausible her suicide. She does not express idle thoughts, and her invective towards the Lord is fierce: "'Lay these words /To heart then,'" she says, "'or where God meant heart should lurk!'" (1558-1559); to brush him would bring "leprosy" (1575); he is the "murderer" of her love (1865); and he is the "Arch-cheat" and "Adversary" (2043).¹²

The Lord is right also to point to her lack of charity. In telling of the hell which her husband preaches, a hell of eternal consciousness where men know sin without the possibility of redemption, she says that any "healthy" or "sane" view of things and of their Maker would immediately dissipate such a doctrine. Yet she shows a marked tendency herself to witness an Old Testament divinity of wrath and just retribution (1553, 2045-2046). She has nothing of the forgiving tenderness of Pompilia, and her severe scepticism, which her trusting innocence has attained through an introduction to deception and brutality, is a quality which is scarcely appealing. Nevertheless, her stoicism amidst the sense of futility in her husband's work and her unwavering hostility towards her seducer give her in this scene a masterful, if self-righteous, triumph.

"Your fate is of your choosing: have your choice!
Wander the world,--God has some end to serve
Ere he suppress you! He waits: I endure,
But interpose no finger-tip, forsooth,
To stop your passage to the pit. Enough
That I am stable, uninvolved by you
In the rush downwards: free I gaze and fixed;
Your smiles, your tears, prayers, curses move alike
My crowned contempt." (2044-2052)

At the end of scene four, the Youth returns to the Inn, finding the Lord prostrate before the Lady in a climactic gesture of remorse. This moment of recognition, when the three protagonists perceive their inter-relationships, though contrived by Browning is intensely dramatic and effective in its context. Scene five begins the concluding action. The Youth initially surmises that the other two are in league, and

impulsively derides them both. Later, he shows that his basic goodness has not been totally suppressed after a year under the Lord's tuition and he exhibits a fine instinct for fair play as he stops the Lord from bullying the woman. His sense of chivalry is enraged enough then to believe all the stories about his "master" which he had previously denied. The Lord is no longer simply a cynic and a deliberate gambler, but the Youth's angry disillusionment now exposes him as a cheat, a fraud and a coward.

The Lady reacts to the Youth's discovery with a cold superiority which is not so much an artifice as a controlled indifference, an aloofness and judicial air which is regal if not presumptuous. She has been engaged by the Cousin to evaluate the Youth, so that she has a valid reason for announcing her verdict--"I find you, save in folly, innocent" (2215)--and yet there is a degree of relish in the role which reinforces her superciliousness. The latter detracts from her virtue, because it is based on derision and scorn, but paradoxically it also aids her plausibility. The sincerity of her stand is emphasized not so much by skill of argument or verbal artifice as by her rigid independence, by her unconcern, for example, with what the Youth thinks of her, while she is clearly concerned that he should recognize and reject the Lord's villainy:

"Distribute as it please you praise or blame
To me--so you but fling this mockery far--
Renounce this rag-and-feather hero-sham,
This poodle clipt to pattern, lion-like!" (2205-2208)

This scene reveals her unselfishness. Though the product of self-condemnation which in turn results from her sense of shameful sin, it is

sufficiently real to make her deliberate dignity a paradoxical virtue, instead of a moral liability.

By contrast with the Lady, the Lord's smooth irony in the face of the others' combined hostility registers the artifice which he continually employs. He still attempts to exploit their weaknesses, as he has always exploited other people. Inspired by some new sinister scheme--"The hid snake has conceived a purpose" (2243)--he accuses the Lady of deceiving her husband by failing to confess "the whole horror" of her fall: "'screening the deceiver, lamb were found /Outraging the deceitless!'" (2258-2259). She says she will not destroy her husband's faith which the whole truth would do--"'Saved, I yearn to save /And not destroy'" (2278-2279)--but the lie leaves her vulnerable, despite her worthy intentions. The Lord's cynicism, of course, has difficulty in accepting the notion of unselfish human action, and he perceives this as a weakness which can be turned to advantage. When the Youth prevents him from threatening the woman, for example, he still manipulates her by playing on her fears for the inexperienced Youth:

"I--no more
Bully, since I'm forbidden: but entreat--
Wait and return--for my sake, no! but just
To save your own defender, should he chance
Get thwacked thro' awkward flourish of his thong." (2391-2395)

Scene six consists wholly of the Lord's verbal manipulation of the Youth. It is his final attempt to reverse his position and emerge triumphant, to preserve his social position which the Youth has threatened. He resumes the imperative tone with which he began in scene one, a tacit

resumption of his previous position as the Youth's master. He berates the Youth's ingratitude, and cleverly professes to be in the process now of teaching the Youth another lesson, this one about the wiles of women. Playing on the Youth's earlier anger at his own foolishness, and exploiting his natural desire not to be fooled again, and playing too on the earlier esteem with which the Youth regarded him, the Lord deliberately alters his account of his affair with the Lady:

"Your paragon of purity had plumped
 Into these arms at their first outspread--'fallen
My victim,' she prefers to turn the phrase--
 And, in exchange for that frank confidence,
 Asked for my whole life present and to come--
 Marriage: a thing uncovenanted for,
 Never so much as put in question." (2492-2498)

The story is changed from his earlier version to the Youth, but now he says he has decided to "tell the fool the truth!" (2491). Eventually, having possibly raised some doubt in the Youth's mind, who is in no position to know which version is truer, he undertakes to prove his case: "'When she enters, then, /Make love to her!'" (2601-2602). Whatever the effect of his argument so far, this proposal is dramatic and arresting. Finally, he subtly refrains from advising the Youth what to do, though he clearly indicates which would be the novice's act and which the instructed man's, and he even hints that the proposed act is beyond the Youth. He thus plays on the Youth's pride and on his ambition to be sophisticated and worldly-wise.

In the last two scenes, the action finally reveals the value and depth of moral impulse in each protagonist. The Lady returns and initially

is alone with the Youth. As before, she is independent and superior, but she now shows a tenderness which she has not shown before, though it is a tenderness which emerges from remorse at not responding differently towards the Youth four years earlier. If she had understood the true nature of friend and foe then, as she does now, she would have acted otherwise:

"I do believe I should have straight assumed
My proper function, and sustained a soul,
Nor aimed at being just sustained myself
By some man's soul--the weaker woman's-want!" (2691-2694)

In this action, she would have missed being "in presence of a god," but instead she would have known something of divine creation, "I gained the god's own feeling when he gives /Such thrill to what turns life from death before!" (2697-2698). Perhaps she is presumptuous in seeing her opportunity as godlike, but more importantly she recognizes the chance, which she lost, to have performed some deed far worthier than her work with the old parson. Roma King says that "to have married the young man out of sympathy would have been as much a betrayal of love as to have married the older as compensation."¹³ But the Lady views the matter differently. In marrying the Youth, she would have diverted his soul from a false god; and in an appealing outburst of lyricism, she clearly implies the qualitative difference between what she might have done and what she has done:

"I had shed my love
Like Spring dew on the clod all flowery thence,
Not sent up a wild vapour to the sun
That drinks and then disperses." (2702-2705)

Her marriage, she implies, is a sterile affair, dry after love has evaporated. Having escaped the Lord's "leprosy" at last "uncontaminate," she can perhaps be excused for assuming the imperious tone of a sermon:

"Break from beneath this icy premature
Captivity of wickedness--I warn
Back, in God's name!" (2724-2726)

But when she says, "'I am past sin now, so shall you become!'" (2729), the virtue of her desire to serve as an example for the Youth to imitate is in danger of becoming lost within the suspicion that she has not yet "past" the sin of pride. She concludes by asserting the deceit of her seducer, and by appealing to the Youth's sense of right (2730-2736), and also to his healthiness (2734), which is implicitly contrasted with the Lord's disease (2708).

The Youth replies with a clumsy honesty which knew instinctively, he says, that the Lord had lied about her, though the analogy of his mother implies the blind emotional faith which is the source of his perception (2754-2760). His account of how he escaped from a labyrinth by pushing violently through the thorny hedges is indicative of his tendency towards direct, rather brutal action, and he clearly desires to serve the Lady in some active, heroic capacity. Self-conscious about his verbal ability (2749-2750), and finding truth difficult to perceive through the Lord's subtle artifices (2768-2772), he offers active service. Unsure of what her predicament is precisely, he offers positive action whatever it is:

"if her shame be shame
I'll rescue and redeem her,--shame's no shame?

Then, I'll avenge, protect--redeem myself
The stupidest of sinners! Here I stand!" (2798-2801)

The Youth thus declares a love without qualification. He is unrealistic, naive, committing himself completely to the role of the romantic hero who will willingly sacrifice himself for his love--somewhat in the tradition of courtly love--but above all, he is unselfish and idealistic, the antithesis of his former master. He does inadvertently ask the Lady the question which the Lord proposed, but in a manner quite different from what the Lord had expected, and the difference between this proposal and the Lord's in scene four now totally separates the two men.

When the elder man returns, the Lady takes the Youth's hand. In this sudden, surprising gesture, she seems to corroborate the Lord's attitude and to destroy in one swift movement the value judgements which Browning has carefully developed so far. Even the Lord himself is surprised, though he quickly resumes his social mask of "the much-experienced man" (2860). Believing himself at last to be vindicated, he is vicious and caustic in his triumph, deriding the other two for their assumed mantles of superiority, when they are in fact no better than he suspected or hoped, certainly no better than he, which is perhaps the real point for him:

"So, at suppertime
These masquerading people doff their gear,
Grand Turk his pompous turban, Quakeress
Her stiff-starched bib and tucker,--make-believe
That only bothers when, ball-business done,
Nature demands champagne and mayonnaise.
Just so has each of us sage three abjured
His and her moral pet particular

Pretension to superiority,
 And, cheek by jowl, we henceforth munch and joke!"
 (2866-2875)

But he overplays his hand and his gloating only serves to goad the others' anger.

The Lady then reveals what caused her to take the Youth's hand, and in doing so reveals the Lord's utter villainy. He threatened to betray her secret shame to her husband if she did not elope with the Youth. Missing her hints that she has performed her own remedy--"Therefore I "stopped his mouth the only way" /But my way!" (3001-3002)--the Youth strangles her tormentor. Justice is swift and certain, but is uncontrolled and irrational, since the Youth's confused obtuseness and obstinate devotion to the one fact of "The lady's right-hand" are clearly recorded by the narrator (2967-2971). In his "stupefying," almost unrealistic state, he seems to understand the situation with a primordial instinct which is not subject to rationalization. Though laudable, the destruction of evil by good is an entirely primitive affair.

By contrast, the Lady's death is consciously premeditated, and renders the Youth's action futile. She claims earlier that she has only just learned "What sin may swell to" (2648), but now she says she has anticipated the Lord's venom for four years, and has always kept with her the means of stopping his mouth (3027-3033). Not entrusting herself to God's purpose, she has developed, in her sense of secular reality, a scepticism which almost matches her antagonist's cynicism. However, she is more complex than that, since she observes the potential for good in

the Youth, and she dies to preserve her husband's faith. In the last respect, her suicide is an unselfish act, and yet it is unnecessarily destructive, as she indirectly perceives when she considers how she might have "sustained" the Youth instead of seeking confinement and hard-labour with her husband. Roma King concludes that "her death, in contrast to Miranda's, is chosen and purposeful, her sacrifice being consistent with both her realism and her idealism."¹⁴ But her death is also the result of her precipitate attempt to escape into obscurity, to punish herself in order to expurgate her sin, which is behaviour quite similar to Miranda's. The difference is that she does not die believing a miracle is about to be performed. Also, she engages in an element of deception--her "simulating soundness" (2272)--which allows the Lord to retain so much influence over her. Her independence from him depends finally on her willingness to destroy herself in order to thwart his vindictiveness. While that is independence of a kind which the Lord's cynical selfishness could never understand, it is not in these circumstances an independence from the very artifices of deception which provide the basic tools for his pernicious design. Browning again, as in Fifine at the Fair, achieves a fine ambiguity. Good has certainly destroyed evil, but the triumph is undercut by the futility of the act: "'And that was good but useless!" (3023). When the Cousin arrives and announces

the oft-quoted, long-laughed-over line--
 "'Hail, calm acclivity, salubrious spot!'" (3077-3078)

the apostrophe rings with a horrible irony.

The Inn Album presents the reaction of three people to the knowledge and discovery of deception. The Lord views it as characterizing human morality and he exploits its possibilities to exert his purposes and to preserve his existence. The Youth acts impulsively and naturally to destroy it, without considering or comprehending the subtleties or the consequences of his action. The Lady reacts with horror, trying to escape from it and to purify its leprous touch--her suicide may be seen as a kind of martyrdom to the cause of tainted purity. The Album itself functions as the silent repository of man's inane observations; as a symbol of human pretentiousness, it records and contains this drama of social deceit and elemental impulse. With its "Shabby-genteel" surroundings, the book is appropriately isolated from the "art /And civilized existence" outside, since the further man indulges in artifice, the further he moves away from nature and into evil. J. A. Symonds found himself "angry at being forced to pay so much attention to a parcel of knaves and dupes, devils and victims, placed in paradoxical circumstances that outrage the realities of life."¹⁵ However, it is not so much that the circumstances outrage life's realities, as that man's deceit outrages the civilization of the natural world.

NOTES

¹J. A. Symonds, "The Inn Album," The Academy, 8 (27 Nov. 1875),
543.

²H. C. Duffin, Amphibian (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), p. 163.

³[H. James], "Browning's Inn Album," The Nation, 22 (20 Jan. 1876), 49-50.

⁴Philip Drew, The Poetry of Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 335.

⁵Drew, p. 335.

⁶Drew, p. 333.

⁷Since the characters are not named, it is convenient to follow Drew and refer to them as the Youth, the Lord, the Lady and the Cousin.

⁸Drew, p. 333.

⁹Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1968), p. 196.

¹⁰A. Symonds, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, new ed. (London: Dent, 1906), p. 193.

¹¹King, p. 195.

¹²See Drew, pp. 334-335, for the significance of these Miltonic terms.

¹³King, p. 198.

¹⁴King, p. 199.

¹⁵Symonds, p. 544.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DRAMA OF CONSCIOUSNESS

i

In concluding their study of The Ring and the Book, Richard Altick and James Loucks remark that "the search for truth in the midst of deceit and illusion, for stability in the midst of flux, turns out to be the search for the principles of right conduct."¹ Such a statement should not presumably be surprising, since Browning is clearly, in his more representative poems, concerned with the morality of human action and the resources of conduct. Indeed, this interest which tends to be didactic rather than purely aesthetic (though not dogmatic, as some maintain), has unfortunately promoted the deplorable practice of "extracting from Browning's poems innumerable moral plums."² However, putting this tendency to one side, Altick and Loucks' conclusions about The Ring and the Book provide pertinent questions for discussing some of the broader implications in Browning's handling of deception in the long poems examined here.

Two important and related points about moral behaviour emerge from their analysis of Browning's attitude: "man's will remains free and he can save his soul, if he wishes, through decisive action that rends the chains of custom"; and "the pervasive curse of doubt can be countered only by the vigorous response of a soul inspired by Christian teaching."³

Both statements have been taken up by Philip Drew in his review of Browning's Roman Murder Story, where he raises the questions which they provoke. In the first instance, Drew points out that Guido acts "decisively" as well as Caponsacchi and Pompilia, and therefore he asks, "How can we distinguish between the different kinds of free and decisive action?"⁴ In the second instance, he queries the meaning of "Christian teaching," for even if it means "doing what you know to be right regardless of precedent, with the sort of courageous faith that we admire in Christ," there are difficulties: "how does this help us to discriminate between the sort of bold free action which is truly human and admirable and the sort of freedom which is purely selfish and damnable? Or can't we distinguish at all?"⁵ In all the poems discussed here, Browning appears to have been fascinated by this epistemological problem of how man knows value, and he explores its implications not through philosophical analysis, but as always through individual characters and the processes of mind which they exhibit.

The simplest generalization about these poems is that no single doctrine will apply to them all. The Prince is to be criticized because he does not act decisively, Juan because he does. The Prince and Juan are culpable because they lack the inspiration of religious faith, Miranda is at fault because he does have such inspiration. Miranda's death suggests that a realistic perception of human experience should never be divorced from divine belief, but in The Inn Album the Lady's combined sense of realism and divinity leads her to death nevertheless. Juan's convincing argument and Miranda's state of mind both imply that

the handling of deception and illusion is a necessary human activity, but the Prince's recognition of his self-deception leads him to an impasse, and the Lord exploits the possibilities of deceit for malicious purposes. Even the Lady's attempt to handle deception, her pretence to her husband, makes her tragically vulnerable. The Prince and Juan are blameworthy because they lack the strength of will to alter their patterns of behaviour into something worthwhile; Miranda and the Youth have that will and yet both commit futile actions. The Prince, Juan and Miranda all misuse knowledge in some way, so perhaps ignorance is more praiseworthy; but the ignorance of the Lady's husband leads her to call ignorance a sin. Of course, each one of these brief summaries takes up only one aspect of character or situation, and each is a misleading simplification. The real point is that no one situation can be adequately represented as an abstract principle without its entire complexity and unique circumstances being considered. This comment ought to be a commonplace about Browning's poems, but unfortunately it is not.

There is, then, no single organizing moral assumption underlying these poems; rather, there is an attempt to understand the means by which man obscures truth and a desire to discover under what circumstances, if any, man may penetrate the obscurity and act according to some sort of moral perception. In terms of content, there is a semblance of methodical progression, though not necessarily progress, from poem to poem. The first two monologues probe the recesses of individual minds, their perception of themselves and their world, their limitations and their strengths. The emphasis is on self-deception and the possibilities for

penetrating this deception. The second two poems view man in social circumstances, and while there is still interest in self-deception, the emphasis changes (more in The Inn Album than in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country) to the inter-relationships between people, to the flaunting of social artifice and the perception of falsehood in others.

In Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, the Prince's intense self-consciousness makes him aware of the difficulties of self-judgement, of judging properly what is inevitably presented from his own, biased point of view. When he ceases to act his many roles, he faces the hard truth that his argument of expediency for the sake of his people is a lie. But the apprehension of truth, the realization that his maze of language is a deception, does not lead to salvation or to divine inspiration. His perception of truth leads only to an impasse, since the truth he perceives is that all language is inevitably false, and therefore all arguments inevitably futile. For the Prince, self-knowledge is self-inhibiting and the perception of truth means action can only be decided upon by chance. He has no received ideal by which to guide his decision, no stability or inner security of character, and consequently no means of making a rational choice once he must relinquish any fabricated pose. Once the Prince gives up deception, he is left with nothing.

Don Juan, in Fifine at the Fair, moves the problem a stage further. He argues that some deception is necessary to all human activity and to the knowledge of all value. Through deft handling of the paradoxes of truth and falsehood, and through his conscious and skilful flaunting of artifice, he formulates an apprehension of the kind of truth

available to man which is the most significant of any found in these four poems--what may be called, in his own terms, "histrionic truth." His manipulation of ambiguity and paradox enable him to justify his ambivalent behaviour, to reconcile the excitement and vicissitudes of physical experience with the more sober admiration of spiritual value. Juan's individual effort to impose intellectual order on his conflicting experiences and perceptions also involves the more generic struggle between concept and intuition. Man, through thought, continually considers, tries to analyze and thereby to understand, his intuitive experience. Insofar as he engages in this cognitive activity, he engages in artifice as opposed to spontaneous action; both activities, and this is important, are "natural," and for men who are both physically and mentally active there is continual interplay between the two. Through his contemplative processes, man moulds his attitude to himself and to his universe, and he may also attempt to remould or to redirect his attitudes on the basis of his analysis. But when, as in the cases of the Prince and of Juan, man admits no preconceived value structure which may guide his thought or conceptualizing, the process, if he is to remain true to his changing experiences, is a continual and difficult one, with the ever-present possibility of unintentional self-deception, whatever his degree of honesty. Great stress is placed on man's rational capabilities, and if these are flawed, he is doomed to some sort of failure. The Prince, as observed, facing the knowledge of deception in all linguistic forms, cannot sustain his conceptualizing process and is reduced to relying on chance. His exercise of mind has reduced intuition to a gamble. Juan,

on the other hand, has a more vital intellect and is able to make his way if not quite with ease, at least with more success. His artifice in this respect is superior, which is the advance from Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau to Fifine at the Fair. But Juan does not escape without Browning's criticism. His wilful self-reliance, while admirable and even heroic in terms of the romantic assertion of individual will, is egocentric and unacceptably arrogant in its disregard for women, except insofar as they reinforce his reality.

Browning enables the reader to perceive Hohenstiel-Schwangau's moral culpability by dramatizing his inability to make a rational or responsible choice when it is required. He exposes Juan's moral inadequacies by allowing the reader to feel or sense the qualitative force of Juan's attitude to women. It is not Juan's return to Fifine which gives him away--that action is perfectly consistent with the philosophy he develops in the poem--but his failure to consider the value of feminine self-sacrifice except as it is a sacrifice to his aggrandizement.

Perhaps the really heroic or morally good act is one which transcends individual point of view. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country examines a character who attempts this, whose action results from trust in the principles of faith and belief which he has been taught. His is "the vigorous response of a soul inspired by Christian teaching," to employ Altick and Loucks' phrase. But Miranda's action is the result of his insufficient strength of intellect to perceive properly the function of religious symbol. All the characters in this story adhere to external signs, either symbols of belief or indications of social convention.

Most of them, the cousins, Clara and the clergy, are sufficiently aware of the possibilities of deception to exploit them, but Miranda is eventually destroyed because of his impulsive nature which lacks a counterbalancing rationality. He has, of course, a rationality of a kind, which, as Browning points out, in his circumstances makes his leap from the tower a logical conclusion to his thought, but his reasoning functions in terms of a naive literalism. His loyalty to Clara implies a regard for her and a sense of duty, despite opposition, which Juan does not exhibit towards either Elvire or Fifine, and he sustains an unselfish faith in some principle outside himself which Juan does not even attempt. Yet Miranda, because he lacks Juan's intellectual acuity, ironically ends up demonstrating the same faults as Juan--pride and submission to selfish impulses. Browning reveals this through the combined effect of Miranda's soliloquy and the narrator's judicial commentary.

The Inn Album comes closer than most of Browning's poems to portraying character in action rather than the action in character which he more typically focuses on. Consequently, the poem's interest is located in its gradual revelation of character and in the altercation between the three protagonists rather than in intricate processes of mind. Nevertheless, such processes are involved and they probe further the possibility and nature of moral perception. The Lord combines Juan's understanding of the need for artifice with Hohenstiel-Schwangau's manipulation of point of view and confessional technique; he cynically disbelieves all appearance of nobility, and his attempt to prove this view correct provides one of the elements of suspense in the poem. The

difficulty in penetrating the Lord's artifice is amply demonstrated by both the Lady and the Youth, who initially believe him to be a brilliant, masterful individual. The Lady only discovers his deceit through his own confession, and the Youth only discovers it through the Lady, who draws out his latent potential for chivalric devotion. By his own account, the Youth disbelieves the Lord's lies about her for the same reason he would disbelieve accusations against his mother--emotional loyalty. This is not the rational perception of deceit, but the bold spur of impulsive reaction. The Lady's recognition of the Lord's falsehood is not rational either, but the result of severe disillusionment. Her opposition to him in the poem is based on a scornful rejection of his attempts to undermine her claims to moral superiority. She endeavours to combine the strengths of Miranda and Juan--religious belief and duty with an awareness that some deception may be justified--but she still remains vulnerable to the Lord's wiles. While both she and the Youth discover the Lord's evil and act against it, proving their moral resourcefulness, their actions do not transcend their point of view, or rend "the chains of custom." They both act in accord with their previous behaviour. The Youth retains the same obtuse idealism at the end--"half the idiot's stare /And half the prophet's insight" (Inn Album, 2968-2969)--with which he admired the Lord at the beginning; he has swapped a master for a mistress. And the Lady retains her proud austerity; she would rather destroy herself than admit her sin to her husband and face his criticism. She says his sermon on hell would be rejected by any healthy view of God and the world, yet she cannot conceive forgiveness, whether God's, her

husband's or her own. Her opposition to the Lord is as much a selfish impulse to preserve her hard-won self-respect and pride as it is a spontaneous impulse to thwart evil.

None of these poems offers the purely generous or unqualified response of right against wrong. Philip Drew suggests that "all the long poems of the 1870s are in a sense Browning's attempts to convince himself that Guido was really wrong and that there was some authentication for human values in a world without God and E.B.B."⁶ If this suggestion is correct, and the examination of deception in these poems would suggest that it is, then Browning's conviction appears to be at best ambivalent. However, he does enable the reader to observe and judge his characters and their actions in great depth of subtlety; consequently, his point of view which he builds into his poems testifies to the possibility of abstracting and authenticating true values from human experience. Browning's attitude in the 1870's would thus be that man rarely, if ever, acts altruistically, and that most, if not all, human virtue is clouded by some form of falsehood; on the other hand, good actions are performed and authentic values can be perceived, if neither motivation nor perception is necessarily pure.

One of the difficulties in achieving this perception of value is provided by the discrepancy between personality and identity. Hohenstiel-Schwangau parades the identity of a ruler who has saved society, but the degree of his moral responsibility cannot be properly judged without understanding the depth of insecurity in his personality. His identity is misleadingly noble. Don Juan's identity as a philanderer and libertine

is, on the other hand, misleadingly base. His underlying personality is finely intelligent and aesthetically sensitive, and these qualities should be examined in conjunction with his external behaviour. The Lord in The Inn Album tries to exploit an ambivalence similar to Juan's.

Not attempting to hide his identity as a society rake, he yet professes to retain an internal, undeveloped merit. The strength of his claim manages to save him from hypocrisy perhaps, and for most of the poem his exercise of the identity/personality distinction helps to obscure the depths of his corruption, but he finally shows that his personality and his identity are equally treacherous. Any distinction between the two, then, is a means of deception and may hide either vice or virtue. It does not deny the efficacy or validity of the reader's judgement, so long as the individual is being totally considered, not superficially.

These poems create a striking impression of what might be termed the artifice of intellect. The Browningsque idiosyncracies of wrenched syntax, complicated sentences and elliptical structures are as intensive here as in any of his works. They support the sense of mental strain, the effort of mind to order the chaos of perceptions which flood it, and they are particularly apparent in the first two argumentative monologues. Browning seems to be suggesting that man's refinement of consciousness leads to the obscuring of truth rather than the clarification of it. The acuity of mind and high degree of self-awareness of both the Prince and Don Juan make it difficult to fault their arguments, to penetrate the poses which, particularly in the case of the Prince, they develop. Related also to this problem are the two passages in Prince Hohenstiel-

Schwangau and The Inn Album which assert that the improvement of culture means the dissociation of individuals. In man's civilization, freedom from care about basic survival leads to an increasing interest in self, in self-aggrandizement and in the artifices necessary for such assertiveness, rather than to a reasoned altruism. Red Cotton Night-Cap Country suggests this in the differences between Clara, who works only for survival, and the cousins, who always seek to improve their wealth. The Inn Album clearly manifests the problem, notably in the Lady's account of her husband's parish, and in the narrator's description of the landscape's natural "civilization." Of course, it is easy enough to reiterate once again that Browning distrusts reason. Yet the matter is not necessarily so simple.

Reason, as he presents its workings, is undoubtedly flawed. But in Book I of The Ring and the Book ("--No dose of purer truth than man digests, /But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now"; 830-831), he maintains that deception is inevitably mixed with truth in human existence, an attitude which Juan clearly follows, and the proper handling of this mixture is an intellectual affair. Otherwise, the pursuit of truth would be a vigorous thrusting aside of all obstacles, like the Youth's attitude, and he is not exactly an inspiration for all to follow. To the extent that the Lady is more rational than the Youth, her action is morally superior. Miranda, of course, explicitly lacks intellect. Also, even the Prince and Don Juan, arch-casuists and wilful deceivers to most readers, eventually recognize their faults. Though they are not led to this recognition by the careful progression of logic (the Prince

wakes to realize his reverie was a deception, and encroaching darkness with its associations of death brings Juan to realize his arguments were selfish), they nevertheless apprehend their errors mentally.

What is more important than man's misuse of intellect is his inability to act upon his moment of anagnorisis. It is possible for man to perceive his mistake, but he seems powerless to do anything about it. This paralysis, or incapability of changing fundamental impulses of character, involves the discrepancy between perception and performance; it also explains the significance of final action in these otherwise verbal dramas and leads to the problem of will. Both the Prince and Juan have the potential to achieve better things, but they succumb respectively to inertia and to sensuality, lacking the will to act otherwise, though both respond to natural human instincts. Final action is important because it alone cannot be ambivalent, though the reasons behind it may be, and it becomes a guide to the moral quality of the persona. In one passage in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, the narrator emphasizes the importance of the consequences of action, the effects of belief as opposed to the origins of belief,⁷ and in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau the Prince's courier metaphor is used to divert attention from the ends of action, which he wishes to avoid analyzing too closely, onto the means. Neither the ends nor the means should be ignored in moral matters.

Browning called Shelley a moral man "because what he acted corresponded to what he knew."⁸ While this is one of the best single statements of Browning's position,⁹ like any other Browning generalization it cannot

be applied without discrimination. The actions of both the Youth and the Lady, for example, correspond with what they know, yet neither is an untainted moral person, even in his final action. Also, neither of them "rends the chains of custom" through decisive action, which, according to Altick and Loucks, Browning in The Ring and the Book believes man is free to do. Both act in accord with their previous behaviour, in accord with custom, and in these four poems Browning doubts that man's will is free to alter the patterns of habit and individual impulse. Each action, or inaction in the Prince's case, retains an element of selfishness. As Morse Peckham asserts, "perception is governed by Will. . . . The Will, however, has but one aim, a viable self-conception that is necessarily a self-deception."¹⁰ In all these poems, Browning exposes and dramatizes this complicated facet of personality; he was no facile optimist in the 1870's.

In thus enabling the reader to view man's limitations, Browning emerges as a satirist rather than a relativist, and he almost invariably employs two of the satirist's conventional tools: the discrepancy between self-knowledge and social image, and the discrepancy between aspiration and performance. Browning's particular interest in the struggle between concept and intuition is familiar in Browning studies, and as one of the fundamental dilemmas of Romanticism, it is familiar also among general nineteenth-century studies.¹¹ Browning's preoccupation with the epistemological problem of knowing and authenticating value is part of a growing concern in Victorian literature, beginning with the emphasis on individual vision which emerges from Romantic thought. In these respects, Browning

is hardly an innovator. However, his uniqueness and significance lie in his ceaseless efforts to locate this intellectual question within the complexities of human personality.¹² This endeavour emphasizes again the need to examine each poem in its total subtlety before attempting to generalize about his beliefs.

ii

Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Fifine at the Fair and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country all exhibit a consciousness of literary techniques. The first two, particularly, are as much poems about poetry as about the personae they dramatize. In this respect, they follow a long line of Browning's poems which discuss aesthetic questions: among others, Sordello, "Transcendentalism," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Abt Vogler," "How It Strikes a Contemporary," and The Ring and the Book. The principles expressed in the poems of the 1870's involve no radical change from earlier principles, and frequently elaborate previous comments. In The Ring and the Book, for example, Browning indicates briefly his interest in the threefold process of feeling, thought and action, and the difficulty in probing its movement: ". . . how heart moves brain, and how both move hand, /What mortal ever in entirety saw?" (I, 828-829). In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, he regards the understanding of this process as necessary to the poet's task:

Along with every act--and speech is act--
There go, a multitude impalpable

To ordinary human faculty,
 The thoughts which give the act significance.
 Who is a poet needs must apprehend
 Alike both speech and thoughts which prompt to speak.
 (3277-3282)

Don Juan, in Fifine at the Fair, repeats the idea of detachedly observing the activities of men which is found in "How It Strikes A Contemporary," and his implicit principle that beauty and truth are to be discovered in the realities of human existence is also expressed in "Fra Lippo Lippi." Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau describes more explicitly than elsewhere the advantages and weaknesses of confessional techniques and the effect of manipulating point of view. The Prince exploits these artifices as part of his self-deception; Browning uses them as essential elements of the dramatic monologue form.

The most significant variation in principle is Juan's emphasis on artifice. In The Ring and the Book, Browning invites his reader to ponder the moral dilemma that art is a lie:

What's this, then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
 Are means to the end; themselves in part the end?
 Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too? (I, 700-705)

Juan in effect answers this question when he says "The histrionic truth is in the natural lie" (1492). In pointing to the parallel between art and life--the artifices in one reflect the artifices in the other--this statement combines Browning's aesthetic with his metaphysic.

Deception becomes a common denominator in both art and life which enables the reader to enjoy exercising similar faculties of discrimination in both real and aesthetic experiences. The reader's experience of a

poem thus becomes an analogy for his experience of life, and through this principle Browning manages to fuse didactic intentions with aesthetic design, to unite his philosophical, moral interest with aesthetic form. The processes of thought, man's artifices of the intellect, are integral to Browning's understanding of man's ethical behaviour. Consequently, since thought is dependent on language for its articulation, and perception is dependent on levels of consciousness, which in turn are also inextricably linked with language, it is only a short step from apprehending such conditions to presenting language in some kind of artistic organization which would intensify and dramatize man's conceptual dilemmas.

Browning imposes a heavy burden on his readers, particularly in the two monologues, but it is a burden directly related to similar difficulties in understanding the complexities of human character in real life. Perhaps an aspect of Browning's success in imitating the conditions of actual existence is the way critics have, for example, been frequently too willing to treat Juan's libertine identity as sufficient reason for judging him adversely, without attempting to probe his character further.

Critics now tend generally to agree that Victorian authors, particularly the poets, sought some way to fuse private vision and public form, to restore an acceptable relationship between individual perception of value or truth and social order.¹³ Browning by no means provided final answers to this problem, but Juan's "histrionic truth" at least posits a convincing principle for uniting ethical, intellectual and artistic purposes.

In discussing "Fra Lippo Lippi," and in describing Browning's method in his successful poetry as "a dialectical play of opposites, brought together at their climaxes . . . in a synthetic union of personality and ideas," David Shaw defines the danger which this form of art faces:

. . . if the "philosophy" solves the problem that the speaker raises . . . then the poem will cease to be a dramatic monologue . . . and become instead a mere lecture by the poet himself. . . . Once a character discovers the "truth," his dialectical pilgrimage is over. Because we can predict what such an oracle will say, he is seldom entertaining as a person. This paradox helps explain why Browning's increasing preoccupation with the "truth" could prepare for the tedious exposition characteristic of his later period.¹⁴

But the four poems analysed above do not provide such tedious exposition. In no instance does the philosophy solve permanently the problems raised, and while a character such as the Lady may think she knows the "truth," her attitude is undermined with sufficient irony to maintain interest in her personality. Only in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country does Browning become overtly didactic and there it is made palatable by the playfully ironic narration and the psychological interest in Miranda and Clara.

Isobel Armstrong says in her generally excellent introduction to Browning that after The Ring and the Book "there are erratic flashes of strange intensity in poems such as Fifine at the Fair (1872), but in general Browning lost his agnostic puzzlement and became dogmatic--and boring."¹⁵ In these four poems, Browning may be didactic but he is never dogmatic, and though difficult he is not boring, except in some of the

repetitious passages in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau. Even these, however, can be explained as realism. The judgement which Browning implies of each persona is always subtle and in terms of the total complexity of personality and identity which he examines.

E. D. H. Johnson's dissatisfaction with the later poems is perhaps the most representative. He explains their weakness as "a failure in dramatic sense":

. . . the later monologues lack internal action of the kind produced by emotional intensity. Ironically enough in one who so distrusted the theorizing faculty, intellect comes to preponderate over feeling. What these poems offer is not the throb of passion, but the psycho-analytic investigation of motives behind impulses which never themselves get actualized. Having previously dispensed with incident, Browning now tends at one further remove to refuse emotional involvement in the situations he evokes. And, correspondingly, the reader finds it more and more difficult to care very greatly why a character acts in a given way when the act itself, anticipated or retrospective, has not been made to seem interesting or significant.¹⁶

By citing "later monologues," Johnson presumably means to exclude Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album, since his strictures apply in only an extremely limited sense to those poems. A man who attempts to drown himself, who burns his hands, who travels notable distances on his knees and who jumps from a tower expecting to be carried by angels could hardly be said to lack emotional intensity of some kind, and he by no means asserts intellect over emotions. Rather than exhibiting a driving regularity, his "throb of passion" is perhaps syncopated, divided as it is among his mother, La Ravissante and Clara, but motives and impulses are actualized in one large leap, and his final act has immense significance for several areas of human interest--sanity, reason,

faith, religion, love (both secular and divine), avarice, pride and of course deception. Similarly, in The Inn Album, the Lady and the Youth both evince a clear emotional intensity and intellect preponderates only in the Lord. Even he is not devoid of all feeling; his artifice is simply more effective and controlled. The Lady's scorn, the Youth's longing for a mission, the Cousin's lively gaiety and the Lord's cynicism all involve emotional qualities, and again motives and impulses become fused and actualized in the protagonists' responses to each other and in the final action. The climactic execution and suicide are crucial to Browning's combined interest in epistemology, character and aesthetic form. Without the preceding dialogue with its revelation of thought and attitude, these actions would be meaningless, and without the concluding violence, the preceding drama of personality would be effective and arresting, but it would be ephemeral speculation without purpose, a design without conviction. If the act itself in any Browning poem is intended to avoid futility, that feature alone gives it significance; any ambiguity about the success of this evasion makes it even more significant.

Browning does, however, concentrate on the experience of the mind more in these four late poems than in his better known middle period. There is, as Johnson suggests, an emphasis on psychoanalytic investigation, but this, as has been urged repeatedly in this dissertation, is not divorced from philosophical and aesthetic interests. Particularly in the two monologues, and to a lesser extent in the other two poems, Browning asks the reader to care more about metaphysical and

psychological labyrinths than about the exigencies of individual action. But this demand is not antithetical to poetic creation since these labyrinths are universal in human behaviour and therefore of prime interest presumably to all thinking men.

The answer to Johnson's complaint that "the later monologues lack internal action of the kind produced by emotional intensity," is that the internal action in these poems is produced instead by intellectual intensity. The drama is one of refined self-consciousness; its conflicts are those of mental existence and perception, of morality, belief, scepticism, the nature of human reality, and the cultivation of intellect with consequent implications for man's knowledge of himself and of his surroundings. If the Prince and Juan are isolated individuals, seemingly remote from the more ordinary notions of human passion and action, that is partly the point, for the mind is an isolating phenomenon. Johnson observes that Browning, "while professing dependence on the outer world, could never accept its evidences until they had first passed through the filter of his imagination."¹⁷ But Johnson misses the centrality, which Browning does not, of this predicament in human perception. Walter Pater recognizes and describes the problem in his conclusion to The Renaissance: "Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us. . . . Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world."¹⁸ The mind's handling of this dream and its potential for penetrating the wall

of personality in order to discover some authentic principle of behaviour are matters which preoccupy Browning in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau and Fifine at the Fair.

Johnson focuses his argument on Fifine at the Fair, where, he says,

Browning overreaches himself and so loses control over his argument. For such appeal as the poem makes rests in the very skill with which the protagonist rationalizes his selfish desires and thereby reduces morality to conform to private convenience. Deprived of any ethical sanction, the emotions become the plaything of intellectual casuistry; and this too often seems to be the case in those later monologues where the dramatic conflict enacts itself on a level of abstract ideas.¹⁹

While he perceives an important element in the poem (the rationalization of selfish desires), Johnson is unwilling to evaluate the work on its own terms and he does not therefore admit its positive effects. He turns Juan's convincing argument into Browning's loss of control over the poem and does not, it seems, understand the manner in which Browning develops the discrepancy between Juan's selfishness and his skilled argument as a subtle but pointed satirical device. Also, it is inadequate to say that "the emotions become the plaything of intellectual casuistry" when they are deprived of ethical sanction, since the relationship between emotions and intellect is a paradoxical interdependence rather than a straightforward submission of one to the other. Juan's emotions, in their responsiveness to continually changing experience and in their attachment to sensual satisfaction, are basically selfish and provoke the intellect to justify their indulgence. In this sense, they seek ethical sanction

through casuistry, which also means paradoxically that they submit to the ability of casuistry to provoke this sanction. (Lest the objection be raised that the emotions do not necessarily come first, it should be remembered that it is Juan's swim and dream, and his emotional responses to these experiences, which promote his speculations.) Because they require ethical sanction, selfish emotions become dependent on intellectual casuistry in order to retain their sway over the mind. At the same time, since in governing perception the will operates, as Peckham suggests, to develop "a viable self-conception"--which is essentially a selfish, though natural, preoccupation--intellect is also largely motivated and moved to exertion by these same selfish emotions. This situation promotes a ceaseless play of desire and justification which constitutes the mental life of Juan and most other men.

Browning is concerned, of course, with the place of morality in this perpetuum mobile of the mind. Juan does finally realize that his arguments are false because they are selfish, and he reaches this conclusion after perceiving the circular process of his thought and the consequent futility of his intellectual effort. Although the emotional aspect of futility is involved, the perception is an intellectual one, the result of thought, and not emotional impetus. Juan then argues for faithful, and conventionally ethical, commitment to Elvire, until the will weakens, when he succumbs once more to selfish prompting and the cycle begins all over again. The consequences of Fifine at the Fair in terms of the source of morality is rather startling for a Browning poem, since the implication is that unselfishness is an intellectual concept, not an intuitive one.

Inevitably, however, this conclusion is misleading. A final point which Johnson misses in his complaint that the drama is enacted "on a level of abstract ideas," is that man's flow of ideological argument may itself generate what may be called intellectual emotions. Morse Peckham makes the excellent observation that "the peculiarity of [Browning's] dramatic monologues is not so much in the interaction between the speaker and situation in which he is speaking, but rather that the flow of utterance becomes part of and changes the situation, and thus changes the character of the interaction."²⁰ Through this process of interaction with what he says, the speaker responds emotionally to the concepts he evolves. Various fears--of non-being, of futility, of death, of foolishness, of impermanence--are strong and imposing emotions, and they are intellectual emotions because they are based on knowledge and perception. They are of the mind rather than the heart, not necessarily rational, but emerging from the conscious rather than the unconscious mind. As the Prince and Juan attempt to rescue their being from the threat of in consequence, their monologues generate emotions ranging from humorous scepticism to weary despair, from quiet admiration to caustic bitterness. But insofar as these emotions and fears are reactions to the notion of self-extinction, they are all selfish in some way. Thus, Juan's perception of his selfishness is promoted by his response to the sense of futility and personal death, and his momentary commitment to Elvire is motivated in part by his selfish desire for some sense of his personal permanence.

Much of the interest in these dramas of consciousness lies in this equivocal ability of reason to perceive good or unselfishness while it

simultaneously deceives itself. The artifices of the mind are devious and the means of deception are various, yet man is by nature a thinking animal, and the constant interplay in his character between concept and intuition promotes endless possibilities for dramatic conflict. Browning examines these processes in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Fifine at the Fair, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album with immense subtlety and insight.

NOTES

¹Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks, II, Browning's Roman Murder Story (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 361.

²Morse Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries (New York: Braziller, 1970), p. 85. For Peckham's further comments, particularly his point that the "moral jewels" are more usually ambiguous, see pp. 85-87.

³Altick and Loucks, pp. 359, 361.

⁴Philip Drew, in Victorian Poetry, 6 (1968), 370. Hereafter cited as Review.

⁵Review, p. 371.

⁶Review, p. 372.

⁷See Philip Drew, The Poetry of Robert Browning (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 326.

⁸Browning's Essay on Shelley, ed. L. Winstanley (London: Heath, n.d.), p. 151.

⁹See Drew, p. 251.

¹⁰Peckham, p. 96.

¹¹See, e.g., Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: Random House, 1957).

¹²See Peckham, p. 103, and cf. Drew, p. 251.

¹³E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton University Press, 1952) is the most influential study in this regard.

¹⁴W. David Shaw, The Dialectical Temper (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 161-162.

¹⁵Isobel Armstrong, "The Brownings," in The Victorians, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books, 1970), p. 307.

¹⁶Johnson, pp. 138-139. For similar views, see, for example, Leslie Stephen, "Browning's Casuistry," National Review, 40 (Dec. 1902),

534-552, and William O. Raymond, "Browning's Casuists," The Infinite Moment, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 129-155.

¹⁷Johnson, p. 142.

¹⁸Walter Pater, The Renaissance (1873; London: Macmillan, 1902), p. 235. Charlotte Watkins refers to this passage in her discussion of Fifine at the Fair, in PMLA, 74 (1959), 426-437.

¹⁹Johnson, p. 139.

²⁰Peckham, pp. 91-92.

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