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ROBERT BROWNING AND THE VICTORIAN DEBATE ABOUT
THE PROPER SUBJECT-MATTER FOR POETRY

by

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SUMMARY

In her introduction to Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830-1870, Isobel Armstrong recognizes that 'Probably at no other time has there been such intense concern with the subjects of poetry, with the simple matter of what poetry should be about. This is the recurrent and most important concern for the Victorian critic--what are the proper materials of poetry?' (p. 13). In this dissertation I intend to examine why there was 'such intense concern with the subjects of poetry', and to argue that this concern was by no means a 'simple matter'. It is my thesis that the subject-matter debate formed the centre of a larger debate about the nature and function of poetry, and more generally, about the nature and function of art. From my examination of these debates I hope to demonstrate--first, that there is a distinct Victorian poetic theory, which should be recognized as making important contributions to our understanding of poetry, and secondly, the centrality of Browning to Victorian poetry and poetic theory.

Victorian poetic theory has generally been regarded as confused, diverse, and unoriginal. The greatest Victorian critics, for example, Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin, are seen as being annoyingly inconsistent and much given to confusing art with life. Through a study of the subject-matter debate I shall argue that Victorian poetic theory is largely exploratory, and should be viewed as a continuous process of thesis and antithesis. Points of contention are often taken up and revised several years after their first airing. For example, Browning's prefatory note to the Agamemnon (1877) is quite clearly directed at views

which Arnold put forward in his Preface twenty-four years earlier.

It is my argument, then, that an understanding of the importance of, for example, Arnold's poetic theory, requires not just a grasp of Arnold's writings, but at least some knowledge of the ways in which his writings stimulated, developed, and clarified the views of other critics and poets, who in turn helped Arnold to come to a clearer understanding of poetry.

Victorian poetry and poetic theory have also been condemned for being full of 'impurities' and for not developing a distinct critical vocabulary. Again these criticisms are part of a failure to understand the basic nature and aims of Victorian poetics. The central concern of most Victorian poets was to establish poetry as an important and relevant part of life. It is a major argument of this thesis that Victorian poetic theory deliberately viewed the poem from a wide perspective: a perspective which is not narrowly concerned with the poem as words on a page. This does not indicate a failure of aesthetic appreciation, but an important broadening of the basis for such an appreciation. The Victorian ideal of poetry as a 'criticism of life', or as something of immense value to life, suggested the possibility of a poetry which could deal with any subject--whether religious, philosophical, or political--and which was capable of affecting every part of man's intellectual and emotional life. The absence of a specialized critical vocabulary is not a negative, but a positive attribute of Victorian poetic theory, and, as I argue in my conclusion (Chapter Five), it is an attribute which is connected to the main vehicle of Victorian poetic theory--the periodical. The Victorian periodical deals with a great variety of subjects, many of which now seem incredibly specialized for the general reader, but the articles in general do not require any knowledge of a technical vocabulary.

No fragment of knowledge is regarded as separate or detached from the whole of life.

The scope of this study, moving as it does from the subject-matter debate to an examination of the main characteristics of Victorian poetic theory as a whole, is extremely wide. To concentrate the argument, and to illustrate the most important features of that argument, I have centred this study on Robert Browning. This is by no means an artificial or arbitrary concentration: in my view Browning emerges quite clearly as the most original poet and poetic theorist of his age, and should be recognized as being deeply involved with, and central to, the poetic thought of the period.

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters One and Two), deals with the context of the subject-matter debate and examines the problems and aims of the Victorian critics and poets. The last section of Chapter One, and the whole of Chapter Two, presents Browning's assessment of the position of poetry and poetic theory in his era, and his development of a poetic theory and practice specifically directed at meeting the main criticisms directed at poetry at that time. The second part of the thesis (Chapters Three to Five), concerns itself more directly with the subject-matter debate, but emphasizes throughout that this debate always involved the greater questions of the end and aim of poetry. Both parts have introductions which outline, in some detail, the larger arguments of each part, and the more specific arguments of each chapter, or of the main divisions within each chapter.

Since Browning did not write a direct account of his poetic theory, our understanding of his poetic views must be derived from his 'Essay on Shelley', his letters, and most especially, his poems. Browning's inclusion of poetic theory in his poetry is in itself an important point,

central to the conclusions of this study. It demonstrates Browning's belief that poetry can be written on any subject. It emphasizes Browning's obsession with the indirect communication of truth: an obsession shared by many nineteenth-century thinkers (for example, Carlyle in Sartor Resartus and Kierkegaard in Either/Or). Most important of all is that Browning's poetic theory, expounded and demonstrated by the poems which contain it, reinterprets and redefines poetry by the poems themselves. The Ring and the Book, for example, succeeds as an epic poem yet breaks most of the conventional rules of epic.

Browning's poetry not only challenges the idea of a proper subject-matter for poetry, but also questions the whole notion of a stable and unchanging theory and practice of poetry. He deliberately explores and breaks through the boundaries of his art-form to suggest that poetry must continually change and develop with the gradual progression of mankind towards a perfect understanding of truth.

In many ways Browning's theory reflects the best points of the Victorian subject-matter debate: it is exploratory rather than conclusive, it places poetry in the midst of life, and it exhibits an energetic delight in the challenge of discovering the means of creating beauty and perceiving truth in the confusing turmoil of modern life.

PART ONE

THE CONTEXT OF THE SUBJECT-MATTER DEBATE

Introduction

A. OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT OF PART ONE

The intention of this study is to suggest the development and orientation of criticism in the Victorian period towards a poetry, and an understanding of poetry, strong enough and flexible enough, to meet the challenge of the discordant complexity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The title of this thesis requires explanation on three points: first, in what way is the debate peculiarly and distinctly Victorian; second, why was the question of subject-matter of such import; and third, why should Browning be considered central to the debate? These questions will be considered in the first chapter. I have tried to avoid any presentation of the historical background; the major concerns and controversies of the Victorian era are examined only for what they contribute to the main theme of the chapter--the position of poetry in the age.

In The Mirror and the Lamp, M.H. Abrams discusses what he means by the orientation of Romantic theory:

an orientation in aesthetic theory is not an idea, or even a premise, but a habitual direction of reference; and to find that the romantic critics usually looked to the poet when they talked about the nature of poetry does not justify the assumption that they had any specific body of doctrine in common. (p. 100)

The Victorian critics certainly lacked any specific body of common doctrine: the great characteristic of the theories of the era is their

diversity. Matthew Arnold described the criticism of the period as being in a state of confusion:

the confusion of the present times is great, the multitude of voices counselling different things bewildering, the number of existing works capable of attracting a young writer's attention and of becoming his models, immense.¹

Yet, accepting this multitudinousness, to borrow one of Arnold's favourite words, one can still discern a distinct Victorian orientation, and this central common attribute is the intense awareness of the age. This 'habitual direction of reference' to the age itself is a major shift of interest from Romantic theory, and one which has not been examined adequately as the main force in the shaping of Victorian poetry and poetic theory. The reasons for this orientation will become clear when we regard Victorian poetics in the context of the period.

From an examination of this context, the unique importance of this period to the eternal debate about the value of poetry becomes obvious. While debates about the worth of poetry go back to Aristotle and Plato, there had never before been a time when art in general, and poetry in particular, had been so seriously threatened by the entire environment of the age itself, and by the attitudes which this environment created. In the Victorian age the issue was not merely hypothetical: it was not, as it had been for Plato, a question of whether poets should have a place in some ideal republic, but whether poets and poetry should be taken seriously in the real world, the civilised modern world of William Morris's Burslem, Widnes, and Manchester. The antithesis between the orientation of poetic theory towards the age, and the hostility of the environment of the age to the creation of poetry, is realised particularly sharply in the ambiguity with which poetry was regarded, even by

the poets themselves.

In Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art', the poet is divided between his desire to retreat into a private world of art and a fear that this isolation is a proud and sinful evasion of duty.

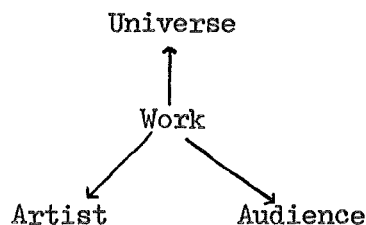
O God-like isolation which art mine,
I can but count thee perfect gain,
What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
That range on yonder plain.

The division between the artist and the rest of society is clearly suggested here. But the idea of a palace of art is presented as a guilty thought and Tennyson eventually makes the soul in the 'pleasure-house' come to realise that such a life of art for the pleasure of art is sterile, lonely, and damnable. Yet Tennyson's poem offers no resolution: there is no integration of art into society. The artist must choose one or the other. In fact, like Matthew Arnold, the artist in Tennyson's poem leaves his art and enters society in the hope that eventually he may lead others to share the pleasures of his 'palace towers'. The implication is that art has only a right to survive if it can be of use to society or if society can be led to participate in its pleasures.² It is this possibility which wards off its destruction, 'Yet pull not down my palace towers'. The capacity of art to evade this threat depends on the artist's ability to share or to communicate his art to the rest of society. It is this problem of a shared vision of art, of communication between poet and audience, which created great difficulties in the theory and practice of poetry.

While the first section of Chapter One concerns itself mainly with the milieu of the age, and the second section with the particular effects which this had on poetry and its theory, it is clear that these sections

are about cause and effect, and in many ways the division is artificial. The main argument of this second section will be that there occurred a breakdown in the line of communication between the poet and his audience. What the poet sought to express in his poem, and what the audience expected or hoped to receive from the poem, were no longer in accord. Subject-matter became the dominant element in the poetic criticism of the period because it seemed to be the element which best provided the bond between poet and audience. If certain subjects could be defined which met the demands and needs of the Victorian audience, then the poet, by making poetry from such subjects, would attain his traditionally high position as the voice of his age and of his civilisation.

At this point it may be helpful to introduce a simple diagram from Abrams's The Mirror and the Lamp (p. 6), which outlines four co-ordinates common to almost all theories of poetry.



The universe is both the external world which surrounds each individual, and his private and personal vision of that external world. The poet shapes and presents an aspect of this universe into a poem, which is received by the audience which then relates this presentation to the universe of its own perception and experience. An understanding of what poetry is, and the attitudes adopted towards poetry, are determined by the emphasis and interpretation put upon each of the four factors illustrated above. The crucial task for the poet is to maintain a balanced relationship between these elements, and for the Victorian poet

it was just this process of relation which broke down. The common source of reference, the universe, had lost its collective interpretations, its understood meanings. There was no shared imaginative understanding of the universe by which the poet could go beyond factual reality to suggest an ideal poetic truth and beauty. Religion, philosophy and myth were not strong enough in the Victorian era to command a conviction of belief and depth of feeling capable of overcoming the habitual reference to the universe of everyday matter-of-fact life. The questions which haunted the artists of the period were whether there was any common vision or belief, whether there was any real possibility of communication beyond superficial externals of contemporary life and the simplest emotions and sentiments.

The division between the artist and his audience, and between art and its relation to real life, becomes more and more clearly defined as the century draws to a close. In the conclusion to The Renaissance (1873), Walter Pater held that each man's vision of life was peculiar to himself: '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' (p. 235). By 1885, James McNeill Whistler in his 'Ten O'Clock' lecture declared that the world of the artists 'was completely severed from that of their fellow-creatures, with whom sentiment is mistaken for poetry, and for whom there is no perfect work that shall not be explained by the benefit conferred upon themselves. Humanity takes the place of Art, and God's creations are excused by their usefulness' (p. 7). The balance between the elements which make up our understanding of art is gone. The direct relationship between poet and audience is severed and the universe is no longer the common factor linking poet, poem and audience.

This divorce of art from life, and of the artist from his fellow-creatures, was exactly what Victorian poetic theory attempted to overcome. The Victorians did more than restate old ideas, or present a confused hotch-potch of earlier theories, they developed a coherent and positive approach to poetic theory. Earlier theories and periods of art were studied strictly from the point of view of what they could contribute to the Victorian age. The greatest of the critics attempted to place art firmly at the centre of everyday human life, as they believed it had been in classical and medieval times. In an age of increasing specialization and fragmentation in knowledge, poetry was regarded as a cohesive force, as that which bonded man to man and expressed the essential attributes of human nature and the human spirit.

Matthew Arnold in his essay of 1880, 'The Study of Poetry', wrote:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.

(CPW IX, 161)

Poetry for Arnold becomes a criticism of life: it replaces and surpasses religion and philosophy 'to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us' (p. 161). Arnold concludes his essay by stating that great poetry will always be valued because of 'the instinct of self-preservation in humanity' (p. 188). It is this last point which gives Victorian criticism its sense of urgency and high seriousness. While some of the criticism may seem crude in its confusion of art and life, and in its demands for moralistic or didactic verse, the unique strength of the best criticism of the period lies in its fusion of the destinies of mankind and of poetry.

The concern with the age is a concern for the survival of art as something central and of intrinsic value to society, and for the survival of man as a being of noble spirit and of noble feeling. The special concern with subject-matter is a concern to find a common-ground between the aims and vision of the poet and the demands and worldly vision of his audience. The attempt to find a proper subject-matter for poetry was an endeavour to remove the ambiguity with which poetry was regarded. Behind Arnold's vision of the 'high destinies' of poetry as the future consolation of mankind, lurked the suspicion that the mass of mankind, Tennyson's 'droves of swine' or Arnold's Barbarians and Philistines, regarded it as trivial and of rapidly declining interest.

The third and final section of Chapter One, and the whole of Chapter Two, will deal with Robert Browning's poetic theory, a theory which must be deduced largely from the poetry itself. The argument will show how Browning's theory and practice were a positive contribution to the debate about poetic subject-matter and to the wider issue of the reassessment of what poetry is, and what its function is, in an increasingly urban, materialistic and heterogeneous society.

The central dilemma of Victorian poetics was the problem of creating a common vision. It was with the particular problem that Browning concerned himself. While very obviously sharing the intense awareness of his age, which so troubled his contemporaries, Browning is distinguished by his acceptance of the conditions of that age. His subject-matter ranges widely from the topical or journalistic, as for example Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and The Inn Album, to the obscure and remote, such as Sordello and 'Ivan Ivanovitch'. But his subjects are never chosen as a deliberate response to the demands of his audience or as a deliberate contrast to, or escape from, his age. In fact

Browning shifts the emphasis from subject-matter to the treatment or presentation of subjects.

Browning's poetry reveals a constant interest in the establishment of new relationships between the elements which make up an understanding of poetry. He is the most conscious innovator in Victorian poetry. His innovations do not evolve from some personal impulse, divorced from his idea of what poetry should be or do. Even in his early poems he expresses his theory in his poetry. In Browning there is no underlying opposition of theory and practice, as there is in Arnold, neither is there, as there is in Tennyson, a conflict of views, a private and public voice. The supreme achievement of Browning is his conscious control of opposites and of conflicting impulses, and this achievement is accomplished through his revision of the elements of poetry, a complete reassessment of what constitutes poetry. It is this reassessment and revision which will form the main part of these sections on Browning's poetic theory.

This outline of Part One is intended as no more than an indication of the direction of the argument. Qualifications, counter-arguments and additional points bristle in the background and will be allowed their proper place in the chapters which follow. The next section offers an explanation and justification of my choice of perspective.

B. THE SEARCH FOR AN ADEQUATE PERSPECTIVE

For all the work done on Browning in recent years, he remains in many ways the unknown poet, and old myths and labels 'stick like burrs' to his poetry.³ Very few works study the development of his poetry as a whole, or attempt to place this development in the context of the age in which he lived, and in the context of the poetic theory which he helped to shape. For the modern reader the difficulty is not so much, as it was for many Victorians, to reconcile themselves to the fact that he who made Pompilia made Guido, but to grasp that the lyrics, The Ring and the Book, and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, for example, are all Browning's works. It is true that Browning wrote dramatic monologues, but he also wrote in a great many other forms and experimented with the dramatic monologue to such an extent that there is little that our twentieth century poets have done in that form which was not anticipated in some degree by Browning.

In her introduction to The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations, (1969), Isobel Armstrong surveys the devastating effects of the reevaluation of Victorian poetry by such influential critics as Eliot, Richards, and Leavis. Although answers have since been made (the most famous perhaps being Robert Langbaum's The Poetry of Experience and E.D.H. Johnson's The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry), 'reconsiderations' are still necessary, particularly in recognizing the variety in Victorian poetry. Isobel Armstrong chooses Tennyson to demonstrate that 'Victorian' cannot be used as a simple tag. For example, the smugness so often attributed to Tennyson depends entirely on whether one reads Enoch Arden

or 'St Simeon Stylites'.

In many ways an understanding of Browning and his age is a battle against previous interpretations and a struggle to find an adequate perspective.⁴ Part of the problem was recognized by Thomas Carlyle in 'Characteristics' (1831) where he wrote: 'our being is made up of Light and Darkness, the Light resting on the Darkness, and balancing it; everywhere there is Dualism, Equipoise; a perpetual Contradiction dwells in us: "where shall I place myself to escape from my own shadow?"' (Works XVIII, 27). This has led to the view that Victorian poetics contributed little that was new except confusion, and that Victorian poetics and poetry lacked clarity and singleness of conception. It is interesting, however, that Carlyle emphasizes balance, dualism, equipoise, and contradiction. These are terms not of confusion, but of argument and criticism. Our understanding of Browning and the Victorian age must begin with an appreciation of their art of dialectics: an art of investigating and testing truth by discussion and experimentation.

The Victorians are often their own best critics, for example, our vague (and rather smug) condemnation of their hypocrisy lacks the bite and humour of so much of Dickens' work or of Clough's brilliant 'The Latest Decalogue'. Browning's poetry is full of theory and criticism, and he occasionally throws out a comment upon the poem he writes:

Well, any how, here the story stays,
So far at least as I understand;
And, Robert Browning, you writer of plays,
Here's a subject made to your hand!
 'A Light Woman', 53-56 (Men and Women, 1855)⁵

or,

That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form:
But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense!
 The Inn Album (1875), 17-18

Browning's 'weighty sense' and 'neglect of form' remained serious charges against his poetry in the twentieth century (the 'weighty sense' being the more serious of the two). But the puzzles which Browning sets us cannot be solved by repeating his own comments or those of the Victorian critics. The problem is to discover if and why he neglects the form to emphasize 'the weighty sense', and why he lays such stress upon an odd subject like 'A Light Woman'. Rather than observing that Victorian poetry is full of 'impurities', as W.B. Yeats said, it is more illuminating to observe the enormous range of subjects which Victorian poetry embraced. An understanding of the importance of subject-matter or content to Browning's poetry, and to Victorian poetics as a whole, must involve an examination of the age itself, and of the aims and ambitions of poets and critics in that age.

As the above argument indicates my approach to the topic of this study involves three strands of development: the movement of thought in the age, the movement of poetic theory, and the movement of Browning's poetry. All three are closely related and each illuminates the other. For example, an important aspect of the poetic subject-matter debate was whether or not the poet should choose his subjects from the contemporary world. It was felt by some critics that by writing about contemporary subjects poets would make their poetry more directly relevant and interesting to those who lived in the age. Browning's place in this debate cannot be properly assessed without recognizing that much of his poetry, even while often set in some remote place or period, centres on the movement of events and of thought in his age. To take an obvious example, while 'A Death in the Desert' may seem to have as its central subject the death of St John, the poem is really about the crisis of faith in the mid-century. It centres on the Higher Criticism of Renan

and Strauss. Renan's La Vie de Jésus was published in June 1863, while Strauss's New Life of Jesus was published in the same year as Dramatis Personae, 1864, so that the thoughts of Browning's St John were highly topical.⁶ It is this interrelationship of poetry with the age which I wish to emphasize.

The development of forms and of techniques, to express and control tensions and shifting patterns of thought in the age, cannot be appreciated if these emotional and intellectual stimulants to poetic development are lost in some bland general vision of the Victorian age. A sympathetic understanding of the period will also greatly clarify the aims of Victorian poetic theory, as well as increase our appreciation of Browning's poetry. 'A Death in the Desert' is widely regarded as one of those poems in which Browning crosses the boundary of poetry to enter into naive philosophy. Philip Drew says that the poem must 'be accounted a less than completely convincing attempt to use as the matter of poetry the clash of opposed speculations on subjects of intrinsic complexity and importance' (Poetry of Browning, p. 157). DeVane puts it rather more bluntly: 'A Death in the Desert is a sign of the falling off of the poet's creative faculty and the growth of his argumentative habit' (Handbook, p. 298).

Both of these critics raise the important question of whether Browning has managed to make poetry out of his choice of subject-matter. Without attempting to argue here whether Browning succeeds or not, I should like to suggest that a sympathetic understanding of the historical context of the poem increases our ability to appreciate its poetic power. The full ingenuity and emotional charge of Browning's use of the dramatic monologue can only be realised if the reader enters into, and participates in, the creation of the situation. It is the dramatic interplay between

the two ages, now and then, and of what is known in fact in one but not in the other, which forms the emotional bond between the poem and the reader. The poem is not a philosopher's answer to Strauss or Renan, but a poet's speculation. In a letter of 19 November 1863, Browning discusses Renan's La Vie de Jésus and says, 'I make no doubt he [Renan] imagines himself stating a fact, with the inevitable license--so must John have done' (Dearest Isa, p. 180). The poem is an imaginative confrontation of the 'facts' of two ages; it is the expression of an intense desire to fuse the centuries and to fuse, for a moment, belief and disbelief, doubt and certainty. Browning offers no answer to the Higher Critics. The poem is an imaginative and emotional response, but in order to place this response beside the arguments he is reacting to, he shapes his subject into a pattern of disputation. The poem takes the guise of philosophy in order to relate to the subject which inspired the poem--the Higher Criticism of the period. The thoughts and emotions roused by such criticism can thus be given full play in a work of imagination which still maintains its links to the reality of its age.

The reader, then, does not escape into a world of pure imagination, instead he is asked to blend fact and fancy so as to look at his world from a new perspective. But this perspective is achieved not through logical argument but through Browning's creation of an imaginary situation: the whole basis of the poem rests on the fancied fact that the speaker is St John. 'A Death in the Desert' will unquestionably seem dull speculation if the reader does not enter into the creation of the situation, if he does not 'fuse his live soul', the thoughts and emotions of his time, with Browning's imaginary parchment from the first century. Clearly the power of this fusion was much greater for a reader of the 1860's than for a reader of our own time, consequently for us the

poem seems a 'falling off' of the poet's creative faculty and [a sign of] growth of his argumentative habit'.

This digression illustrates what I mean by recognizing the importance of the movement of the age to a fuller understanding of Browning's poetry and also of Victorian poetics as a whole. Victorian poetic theory developed and grew stronger and bolder as the problems of the age became more clearly defined. The variety and confusion of early Victorian poetics cannot be taken as characteristic of the whole of the period. This point may seem laboured but the attempts to make the 'unknown century' (Lewis Namier) clearer have inevitably involved simplification, and occasionally, distortion. The main problem has been one of perspective: in what context should we view the poet or the age?

Robert Langbaum in The Poetry of Experience (1957) writes:

Whatever the difference between the literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they are connected by their view of the world as meaningless, by their response to the same wilderness. The wilderness is the legacy of the Enlightenment which, in its desire to separate fact from the values of a crumbling tradition, separated fact from all values--bequeathing a world in which fact is measurable quantity while value is man-made and illusory. Such a world offers no objective verification for just the perceptions by which men live, perceptions of beauty, goodness and spirit. It was as literature began in the latter eighteenth century to realize the dangerous implications of the scientific world-view, that romanticism was born. (p. 11)

Philip Drew in Poetry of Browning (1970) argues at length against Langbaum's view, and particularly stresses the differences between Romantic poetry, such as Wordsworth's, and Browning's poetry.⁷ Langbaum is right to note the continuity of poetic tradition, but clearly Drew is equally right in saying that 'if Wordsworth's poems can be called "dramatic" at all it is in a very different sense from that which the word bears in the phrase "dramatic monologue"' (p. 26). If the Victorians

are to be regarded as part of the Romantic movement then their Romanticism must be understood as being very different from that of the 'latter eighteenth century'.

What Langbaum fails to consider adequately is historical development. Humphry House writes: 'The cosmic visions of Blake or Shelley were brought to trial against the cosmic facts of astronomy and historical geology. Man was dwarfed by the new conception of time and had to exaggerate his morality and his sentiment in order to restore his self-esteem' (All in Due Time, p. 142). The Romantic and the Victorian poet may both be Post-Enlightenment, but the one is reacting to mainly philosophical challenges, while the other is reacting to those same philosophical challenges and new scientific and technological challenges which demand a very different response from the poet.⁸ The poetry of Wordsworth and the poetry of Browning belong to different ages.

The question of whether or not Browning can be called a Romantic poet must be considered later, at present my concern is to establish a perspective and to justify the approach adopted in this first chapter, and indeed throughout the thesis. Park Honan, in a review essay, 'On Robert Browning and Romanticism' (1973), seems to return us to the uncomfortable position of our seat on the fence between Philip Drew and Robert Langbaum:

Poets do not derive from each other so much as they respond to ideas and attitudes that inform general culture at the time they are writing. Browning derives little enough from the Romantic poets. But all of his work is a development of Romanticism. (pp. 152-53)

However in the same essay he praises Langbaum's study of the monologue for escaping the 'locked-in deceptions of literary history and chronology' (p. 165), and accepts the proposition that 'Wordsworth, Shelley,

Browning . . . Kafka, Borges, and Ginsberg are in effect all contemporaries'. Apparently the main target of his criticism is what he calls 'the Wordsworth-Über-Alles-Thesis' (p. 148). In effect, Park Honan rejects a static standard of Romanticism and stresses the 'development of Romanticism' (though he seems to accept that one can study types of literature divorced from their 'literary history and chronology' which is hard to reconcile with his ideas of development).

The interrelation of the three strands which make up my perspective of Victorian poetry--the milieu of the age, the poetic tradition or the poetics of the time, and the poetry of the individual poet--come together in Philip Hobsbaum's Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry (1979). Hobsbaum studies the poetic tradition as well as the impulse to development (or experiment, as he terms it) arising from historical change. He writes,

the fact that Browning and Tennyson were able to develop the monologue at the same time, and independently of one another, shows that it must have been immanent in the atmosphere of the 1830s. Nevertheless, the form could not be truly central until an age when the major poetic and dramatic forms had broken down. (p. 241)

I have presented this search for a perspective as an important aspect of modern criticism, but in fact the Victorians anticipated our problem in that this issue is a less direct form of a major debate of Victorian poetry; how does art relate to the real world? In his 'Essay on Shelley', Browning presents a theory of poetic development very similar to Philip Hobsbaum's. Experiments or developments in poetry are prompted by the break down of traditional forms and by 'the atmosphere' of the period. In other words, the poet responds both to developments in literature (literary history), and to changes in the

nature and environment of mankind (the history outside literature).

In his 'Essay', Browning describes what happens in a period of poetic change:

A tribe of successors (Homerides) [that is, successors to a great subjective poet] working more or less in the same spirit, dwell on his discoveries and reinforce his doctrine; till, at unawares, the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest. Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe . . . prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight, shaping for their uses a new and different creation from the last, which it displaces by the right of life over death. (p. 68)

Browning suggests cycles of poetic development, movements within literature, but at the same time, he emphasizes the fact that the cycles of poetry are renewed by their essential contact with reality, the non-literary historical background.

Browning's 'Essay' was published early in 1852 but it is clear that the thoughts it expresses were not simply gathered together for the occasion of the publication of the spurious Shelley letters. The ideas in the essay echo throughout his works, both before and after 1852. Of particular interest is Browning's emphasis on poetry's contact with reality. The phrase, 'of the fresh and living swathe', is reminiscent of what he wrote to Elizabeth Barrett in a letter dated 11 March 1845:

The poem you propose to make, for the times,--the fearless fresh living work you describe,--is the only Poem to be undertaken now by you or anyone that is a Poet at all,--the only reality, only effective piece of service to be rendered God and man.⁹

Notice again the two adjectives 'fresh' and 'living', and the stress

on reality. This emphasis on reality, and his interest in 'the times' (reflected in his choice and treatment of subject-matter, as 'A Death in the Desert' illustrates), is a major issue in Victorian poetic theory and one to which Browning made important contributions. These matters will be fully dealt with later on, here they help to suggest how the third strand of my perspective, the movement of Browning's poetry, and of his thoughts on poetry expressed in his poetry, are just as essential to the establishment of a correct outlook on the topic of this thesis as the two more general themes, the movement of the age and the movement of poetic theory.

Philip Drew writes, 'One of the most enduring impressions left by prolonged study of the poetry of Browning is of its uniqueness, a quality which is most easily characterized by pointing to Browning's radical difference from all other poets of the nineteenth century' (Poetry of Browning, p. 3). Browning's poetry is unique, but by viewing it from the perspective I have just outlined, by intertwining the strands of the developments in the age and in poetic theory, Browning's poetry can be seen as a creation very much of his age and of the poetic thought of his age. His 'radical difference from all other poets' remains true, but only if we acknowledge the strong rapport between his work and that of the other writers and artists of the nineteenth century. It is his reaction and response to the events and thought of his time which stimulated him to produce the kind of poetry which he did. It is hoped that the approach adopted in this study will demonstrate Browning's illumination by and of his age.

NOTES TO PART ONE--INTRODUCTION

¹ The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold I, p. 8.
Hereafter the Complete Prose Works will be abbreviated to CPW.

² Cf. the conclusion of 'The Palace of Art' with John Ruskin's remark in Fors Clavigera: 'All the arts of mankind, and womankind, are only rightly learned or practised, when they are so with the definite purpose of pleasing or teaching others' (Works XXVIII, 440).

³ E.g. the view that Browning is primarily a philosopher (now a boring and faulty one), rather than a poet, can be seen as recently as 1976 in an article entitled 'The Superfluous Sage' by C.H. Sisson. Later in the article Browning becomes an 'overbearing sage' and a 'windbag'.

⁴ E.g. Isobel Armstrong in The Major Victorian Poets: Reconsiderations (1969) observes that Eliot, Richards, and Leavis were attempting 'to create and educate a public for twentieth-century poetry' (p. 1). In other words, Victorian poetry was regarded out of the context of its period and judged by the standards of a different kind of poetry. This outlook was not significantly modified as modern poetry established itself. In 1961 Park Honan, in Browning's Characters, could still write that 'Browning's reputation is not very high today' (p. 1), and he suggests 'that we have so far failed to understand his poetic technique because we have not examined his finest work closely in the light of his own evident intention' (p. 3). The early twentieth century perspective, which generally lacked close examination of individual works or an appreciation of the Victorian poet's intentions, has been extremely long-lived.

⁵ All quotations from Browning's poetry are taken from the Penguin Edition of Browning's poetry: The Poems, 2 vols (1981) and, The Ring and the Book (1971).

⁶ For a more detailed examination of the topicality of the poem see DeVane, Handbook, pp. 295-98, and Drew, Poetry of Browning, especially pp. 213-22. Drew extends the list of those to whom Browning was reacting, and makes a good case for believing that Browning had Ludwig Feuerbach in mind for certain passages in the poem.

⁷ See especially pp. 22-37, and Ch III.

⁸ Michael Timko in 'The Victorianism of Victorian Literature' (1975), also distinguishes between the philosophical challenges of the two periods:

One cannot, then, simply speak of a nineteenth-century reaction to the Enlightenment without making some sort of qualification, especially in terms of the influence of German thought; and what has been ignored up to now is the relatively greater impact of Kantian thought--especially his epistemological concern--on the generation from 1825 on, the

Victorian generation. . . . While the Romantics were concerned to some extent with the separation of the self and nature, there was no real sense of the epistemological despair felt by the Victorians over man's ability to know and to integrate both, while certainly there was throughout the Romantic period a strong faith in the interdependence of both, a faith almost completely absent in the Darwinian world of the Victorians.

(p. 611)

Timko's article is not directed solely at the Romantic-Victorian conflation; he is concerned generally 'that the Victorians are in danger of losing their identity' (p. 607).

⁹ The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, 1845-1846, ed. Elvan Kintner, I, 36. Hereafter referred to as Kintner. References to Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, or her later name, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, will be shortened to E.B.B.

Chapter One

THE POSITION OF POETRY AND POETIC THEORY

IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

A. THE MILIEU OF THE AGE

Never since the beginning of Time was there . . . so intensely self-conscious a Society. Our whole relations to the Universe and to our fellow-man have become an Inquiry, a Doubt.

Change, or the inevitable approach of Change, is manifest everywhere.

Thomas Carlyle, 'Characteristics' (1831),
Works XXVIII, 19, 21

The Victorian debate about the proper subject-matter for poetry is the critical centre of a much larger debate about what poetry should be and what it should do in such a world as the Victorians faced. It is the continual consciousness of the age, of it being a new modern era, different from any other, which makes the debate so peculiarly Victorian. The reasons for this consciousness, particularly as it applies to poetry, will be considered here. The more precise effects on poetic theory of what I regard as this central orientation of Victorian poetry towards the age, will be discussed in the second part of the chapter.

Max Beerbohm drew a cartoon of Benjamin Jowett, the distinguished Greek scholar of Balliol College and one of the contributors to the infamous Essays and Reviews, watching Dante Gabriel Rossetti painting a mural on an Arthurian theme for the Oxford Union. Jowett asks, 'What

were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr Rossetti?'¹
 The Jowett of the cartoon looks not at the work of art, but at the subject, and he reacts to that subject as if it were an aspect of his real world demanding a practical and reasonable explanation. Jowett's imaginary inquiry reaches far beyond the subject-matter of Rossetti's mural to question the value of art, or indeed the value of any pursuit which has no clear practical purpose. The quest for the Grail, once regarded as a worthy activity in itself, is now subjected to scientific and utilitarian scrutiny, and the question which Jowett asks is exactly the question which is asked of poetry--of what use is the end result?

Carlyle in 'Signs of the Times' (1829) called his era 'the Mechanical Age', and he traced this 'strong Mechanical character' in 'the general fashion of Intellect in this era' (Works XXVII, 59). 'Our first question with regard to any object is not, What is it? but, How is it? We are no longer instinctively driven to apprehend, and lay to heart, what is Good and Lovely, but rather to inquire, as onlookers, how it is produced, whence it comes, whither it goes' (ibid., p. 74). Carlyle felt that everything was now a matter 'of Expediency and Utility' (ibid., p. 77). Clearly these remarks could be used as a commentary on the reaction of Beerbohm's Jowett to Rossetti's mural, but the main interest of Carlyle's essay is that it is a commentary on the age, observations upon 'the general fashion of Intellect in this era'. He characterizes his age and the thought of his age by saying:

The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work only in the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: This is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us. The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the Beautiful and Good; but a calculation of the Profitable.
 (ibid., p. 74)

In the Victorian era, the debates about the worth of poetry involve the poet in an examination of the entire environment of the age itself, and of the values held by those who shape, and are shaped by, that environment. This forced the poets to become more aware of their art in relation to the age, and to seek a function for their art in that age.

Alba H. Warren in English Poetic Theory, 1825-1865, notes that the Victorians had a 'curiously ambivalent attitude towards art: a certain impatience and hostility towards the works of imagination because they are less than "reality", and an equally one-sided faith in art as a revelation of reality itself' (p. 21). He concludes his survey with an expanded version of this observation:

There is a strange ambivalence in the Early Victorian judgment: it sanctioned prophecy and revelation but required that they conform to law and fact; it applauded individual expression but was likely to label the personal statement as eccentric; its affinities were all subjectivist but it longed for objectivity; and while its prime test was feeling, it was quick to point out the absence of idea and moral. (p. 210)

These remarks will be studied more closely in the later sections of this chapter, my concern here is with Warren's emphasis on the 'strange ambivalence' of the Victorian attitude towards art. Carlyle had already proclaimed in 1831 that the modern man was 'made up of Light and Darkness' and that 'everywhere there is Dualism, Equipoise'. He did not present this ambivalence as strange or curious, rather he saw it as a characteristic arising out of the conditions of the age. An appreciation of the peculiar position of poetry in the era is crucial to an understanding of the aims and directions of Victorian poetic theory.

Again and again artists observe that their audience cannot respond

to art, that the vision of their public has narrowed to the purely physical and material. The artist's dilemma can be compared to a prophet attempting to deliver a people who do not understand his language. William Morris in a lecture pointedly entitled 'Art: A Serious Thing' (1882), describes a typical business man: 'It was quite clear that he never used his eyes for looking at anything that his business or his bodily wants didn't compel him to look: his landscape was bounded by his ledger and his mutton-chop.' Morris goes on to say that this man is like 'the most of people nowadays; and once more I say no wonder that such people look bored and anxious'.² 'Indeed I should hope that man, even when he is so civilized as to be forced to live in Burslem or Widnes or Manchester will still have some longing for beauty left him, enough at all events to feel discontented with the sweet spots I have just named' (*ibid.*, pp. 48-49). It is exactly Morris's hope that the city dweller 'will still have some longing for beauty left him' that John Ruskin rejects:

cities in which the object of men is not life, but labour; and in which all chief magnitude of edifice is to enclose machinery; cities in which the streets are not the avenues for the passing and procession of a happy people, but the drains for the discharge of a tormented mob, in which the only object in reaching any spot is to be transferred to another; in which existence becomes mere transition, and every creature is only one atom in a drift of human dust . . . for a city, or cities, such as this no architecture is possible--nay, no desire of it is possible to their inhabitants.³

Morris and Ruskin are worth quoting at some length because they explain the ambivalent position of art in the age.

Unlike the Romantics, the Victorians face what is primarily an urban environment. The vision of the poet and of his audience is not

directed towards nature, and ultimately to the divine and spiritual. The city dweller's landscape is bounded by his ledger; his environment is created not for life but for labour. In such an environment 'no architecture is possible', Art is excluded, and more than this, 'no desire of it is possible to [the] inhabitants'. Yet, at the same time, both Morris and Ruskin connect Art with human happiness and fulness of living. Art becomes the symbol and expression of life, and of man's individual spirit and nobility, the essence of his humanness. It is the saving antidote to a 'time [which] is sick and out of joint' and in which 'men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand'.⁴ But the problem was that the majority of people did not regard the age as sick, and neither could they share the artist's vision which looked beyond or above their age.

The 'curiously ambivalent attitude towards art', noted by Alba H. Warren, reflects the divisions in the Victorian age itself. The great characteristic of the age is that of disintegration--of society, of knowledge, and of beliefs. Carlyle, in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), felt that 'the present is a crisis' (p. 57), and those things which 'seemed fixed and immovable . . . have vanished', 'society, in short, is fast falling in pieces' (Works XXVII, 58). These characteristics noted by Carlyle created the artist's function in the age, his mission to society, as well as the reasons for his alienation from his age and society. Ruskin argued that the condition of life in an urban civilisation such as the one he described, with its great absence of joy and beauty, led to the absence in man of the ability to appreciate beauty, and hence the artist's audience was unappreciative of true art, art of the 'divine and spiritual'. At the same time, the artist himself was alienated from an environment, both of physical surroundings and of mental processes,

which he found hostile to art. The phrase 'the unpoetical age' became a commonplace, but it was no less deeply felt, as can be seen in Arnold's simple yet emotional complaint to Clough, 'how deeply unpoetical the age and all one's surroundings are'.⁵ The problems which this created for poetic theory will be discussed in the second section of this chapter, but already it is obvious that the only certain common ground or vision between audience and artist, the subject-matter of contemporary life, was in many ways distasteful to the poet.

The division between material and spiritual values meant that most values were ambiguous; good in a materialistic sense was often regarded as bad in a spiritual or moral sense. This difficulty of evaluation is particularly clear in the ambivalent attitude shown not only towards art, but even towards the very precious, because unifying, idea of Victorian civilisation.⁶ Matthew Arnold constantly berated his Barbarian and Philistine countrymen for their superficial material notions of progress. The terms he chose for the upper and middle classes carry in themselves the criticism of their uncivilised and unspiritual condition. They are worshippers of false gods and false values. In part one of Friendship's Garland, 'My Countrymen', Arnold writes:

Your middle-class man thinks it the highest pitch of development and civilisation when his letters are carried twelve times a day from Islington to Camberwell, and from Camberwell to Islington, and if railway-trains run to and fro between them every quarter of an hour. He thinks it is nothing that the trains only carry him from an illiberal, dismal life at Islington to an illiberal, dismal life at Camberwell; and the letters only tell him that such is the life there.

(CPW V, 21-22)

In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864) he makes another such attack on the 'perfection' of England by quoting from a

newspaper on the pathetic case of a girl who murdered her child. England's 'unrivalled happiness' is contrasted to 'the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child!' (CPW III, 273). Arnold's constant target, particularly here, is just this blinkered narrow vision of his countrymen,

it is not easy to lead a practical man,--unless you reassure him as to your practical intention, you have no chance of leading him,--to see that a thing which he has always been used to look at from one side only, which he greatly values, and which, looked at from that side, quite deserves, perhaps, all the prizing and admiring which he bestows upon it,--that this thing, looked at from another side, may appear much less beneficent and beautiful, and yet retain all its claims to our practical allegiance. (CPW III, 275)

This passage from Arnold suggests several important points about the position of poetry in the era. It states more directly the observation made by Carlyle, Morris, and Ruskin--that the Victorian public had a narrow materialistic vision, guided by, as Carlyle put it, ideas of 'Expediency and Utility'. The title, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', could be rewritten as 'The Function of Poetry at the Present Time', since for Arnold 'poetry is at bottom a criticism of life' ('Wordsworth', 1879, CPW IX, 46). Most important of all is the way in which the passage draws attention to the gap between the poet's vision and that of his audience. The two key words in this issue are 'perfection' and 'practical'.

The Grail which the Victorians, including Jowett, pursued was 'perfection', most often in the form of 'perfect knowledge'.⁷ The quest is understandable when one considers the general sense of change and movement which was felt by those living in the age. I have already quoted from Carlyle on this theme, but it is Arnold who best catches

this sense of restless transition:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

(*'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse'*, 85-87)

Tennyson in his *'Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind'* curses his *'damned vacillating state'*. Perfection is a stopping point, an absolute, the promised land which the Victorians so desired to enter.⁸

The material-spiritual split meant that there was no single answer to the question of what exactly perfection was. Carlyle recognized that *'everywhere there is Dualism, Equipoise'*: that is, the balance of two views. This is what Arnold sees as the function of criticism, and of poetry--to make the practical man see both sides (the material and the spiritual). To do this the critic must abandon *'the sphere of practical life'*:

The rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex; most of all will this be the case where that life is so powerful as it is in England. But it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, that the critic can do the practical man any service.

(CPW III, 274-75)

The service offered is nothing less than the discovery of *'what will nourish us in growth towards perfection'*, but it is a perfection which is spiritual and intellectual. The *'best spiritual work'* of criticism is to lead man *'towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things'* (CPW III, 271). It is just this divorce from *'the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere'* which made

poetry appear alien to the age, as something detached from life, unengaged in the movement of the times.

In what could be used as a rejoinder to Arnold, Edith Simcox wrote in 1877:

We are not blind to the sublimity of mathematical truth, or callous to the emotions vibrating in the voice of poetic passion, only while men and women are starving round us in brutal misery, or battenning in brutal ease, the problem and the poem seem far away from half our life, and we become unwilling accomplices in the indifference of our age to some of the noblest works of man. We are called away from the peaceful life of intellectual perception, and many of us are fain to turn reformers in despair, not because we have the reformer's talent or the reformer's taste, but because the world needs so much reform.

(Natural Law: an Essay in Ethics, p. 331)

There is more than an echo here of what Peacock wrote in 'The Four Ages of Poetry' (1820) about the reasons for the declining interest in poetry:

when we consider that great and permanent interests of human society become more and more the main spring of intellectual pursuit; that in proportion as they become so, the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful will be more and more seen and acknowledged. (pp. 18-19)

While Edith Simcox suggests that this neglect of purely intellectual pursuits is unfortunate, Peacock is rather more in tune with the age when he states that it is time to accept that such pursuits are merely ornamental and inferior to practical social concerns. What these quotations express is a clash of ideas of culture, and even broader than this, a clash of ways of thought and perception.

For Arnold culture, civilisation, and progress, are measured by the growth towards perfection of the individual in society. In Culture and Anarchy (1869), Arnold defines culture as 'a study of perfection. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion

for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good' (CPW V, 91). For Arnold, culture is closely linked to criticism, literature, and in particular, poetry. Culture is a study of perfection 'in which the character of beauty and intelligence are both present' (CPW V, 99). 'The idea of beauty and of a human nature perfect on all its sides . . . is the dominant idea of poetry.' Culture 'is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man' (CPW V, 112).

Arnold's idea of perfection has nothing to do with material reforms: these will follow naturally in the wake of 'a human nature perfect on all its sides', through the passion of such a human nature 'for doing good'. But this was not the popular idea of culture, of civilisation, or of the role of literature in the age. Frederic Harrison in Studies in Early Victorian Literature (1895), which actually goes beyond the scope of its title to consider the whole of the period up to the time of writing, proclaimed that,

this is the age of Sociology. . . . This social aspect of thought colours the poetry, the romance, the literature, the art, and the philosophy of the Victorian Age. (p. 2)

He goes on to say that:

Philosophy and Science grew more solemn than ever; and Poetry and Romance lost something of their wilder fancy and their light heart. Literature grew less spontaneous, more correct, more learned, and, it may be, more absorbed in its practical purpose of modifying social life. (p. 18)

This last phrase reminds one of the criticism of Edith Simcox, and of Arnold's recognition that the writer had to reassure his public of his 'practical intentions'. In a letter to John Sterling, written in 1840, J.S. Mill wrote, 'what you say about the absence of a disinterested & heroic pursuit of Art as the greatest want of England at present, has

often struck me, but I suspect it will not be otherwise until our social struggles are over. Art needs earnest but quiet times--in ours I am afraid Art itself to be powerful must be polemical--Carlylean not Goethian' (Earlier Letters II, 446). These remarks suggest not only a division between the artist's mainly aesthetic and spiritual values and his public's utilitarian outlook, but also a problem of communication through art. What is wanted is a prophet, not a mystic. 'To be powerful' art must adopt a direct 'polemical' expression.

Frederic Harrison's study of Victorian literature concentrates on nine authors--Carlyle, Macaulay, Disraeli, Thackeray, Dickens, C. Brontë, Kingsley, Trollope, and Eliot--not one of whom is a poet. All but two of Harrison's studies are novelists, and all could be described as critics of their society and environment who use their art to discuss aspects of their age. While the great novelists of the period are characterized by a choice of subject-matter close to the experiences of their readers and reflecting the environment of the age, the poets tended to choose subjects remote from their age. Arthur Hugh Clough in 1853 noted that poetry chose to represent what was of a 'distant age or country'. 'Yet there is no question . . . that people much prefer "Vanity Fair" and "Bleak House".' He gives the reason for this in the speculation 'that to be widely popular . . . poetry should deal, more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature. . . . the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned'.⁹ While the novel was regarded as part of the popular culture, as part of the new age with its growing and diverse readership, poetry was criticized for remaining outside the interests of the age.

From the argument above it is obvious that the Victorian poet and

critic were very much aware of the great changes in society and in the environment. The world of the Romantics no longer existed: the outlook, the range of vision, had drastically altered. The early Victorian poets, however, were bound to a theory of poetry which remained essentially Romantic, orientated towards the thoughts and feelings of the poet musing in solitude, rather than towards society and the urban, practical, factual age. Raymond Williams, in The English Novel (1970), attempts to trace the reasons for the 'newly significant and relevant life' of the novel (p. 10). His main thesis centres upon the observation that 'the first industrial civilisation in the history of the world had come to a critical and defining stage' (p. 9), and that the novel of the 1830s and 1840s was engaged in 'defining the society, rather than merely reflecting it' (p. 11). The novel is part of the popular culture because it is of the thought and perception of the main body of the Victorian readership. Its subject-matter most often concerned a study of the individual establishing his or her identity in society, and its form was prose narrative, most often presented as fact with close attention to realistic detail. In content and presentation it was, as Clough said, of 'the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned'.

The Victorian sense of identity could not be achieved through a private communion with Nature (and through Nature to God, or to some spiritual understanding of self), but through an exploration of the social environment. Carlyle in 'Characteristics' wrote:

To understand man, however, we must look beyond the individual man and his actions or interests, and view him in combination with his fellows. It is in Society that man first feels what he is; first becomes what he can be. Society is the genial element wherein his nature first lives and grows; the solitary man were but a small portion of himself, and must continue for ever folded in, stunted and only half alive. (Works XVIII, 10-11)

Peacock's attack on Romantic poetry in 'The Four Ages of Poetry' also specifically considers the poet's isolation from society. He mocks the Romantic poet's notion that, 'Poetical impressions can be received only among natural scenes: for all that is artificial is anti-poetical. Society is artificial, therefore we will live out of society' (p. 14).

By the 1820s and 1830s signs of a change in outlook and sensibility are evident. The Romantic poet looked into himself to discover and concentrate on the primitive, elemental, and spontaneous aspects of human nature. His isolation was voluntary, allowing him to come closer to a god-like understanding (for example, Wordsworth is one who 'musing in solitude' contemplates 'Man, Nature, and Human Life'). In the Preface to The Excursion (1814)--significantly a part of a poem which Wordsworth intended to call The Recluse-- Wordsworth observes, 'How exquisitely the individual Mind' 'to the external World / Is fitted' (63, 65-66), and also how exquisitely 'The external World is fitted to the Mind' (68). The poem is 'the creation' 'which they with blended might / Accomplish' (69, 70-71). In his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1801) 'he considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other' (Works, p. 738a). Sharp differences from the Victorian outlook are evident even from such short quotations. The 'creation' is the work of the poet's individual imagination, blended with the inspiration or insight drawn from a Nature which is clearly regarded as made by God for man.

The gulf between the Romantic Wordsworth and the Victorian Arnold can be gauged by comparing the quotations above to Arnold's short early poem 'In Harmony with Nature'. 'Nature and man can never be fast friends' (13). Nature is 'strong', 'cool', 'cruel', 'stubborn': it is a hostile alien force in which man can never find his true self. In

Literature and Dogma (1873) he wrote, 'Ah, what pitfalls are in that word Nature! . . . do you mean that we are to give full swing to our inclinations' (CPW VI, 389). 'The constitution of things turns out to be somehow or other against it. . . . the free development . . . of our apparent self, has to undergo a profound modification from the law of our higher real self, the law of righteousness' (CPW VI, 391-92). For Arnold and the Victorians, Nature is a word of ambiguous meaning, and the interpretation which they put upon it is very different from that of the Romantics.

In this section I have continually drawn attention to the fact that the Victorians regarded their world as urban and social. The Victorians looked for the essential qualities of man as he existed in society and civilisation: his existence beyond those bounds was a mystery and confusion. Carlyle in 'Characteristics' (1831) wrote: 'Doubt, which, as was said, ever hangs in the background of our world, has now become our middleground and foreground' (Works XVIII, 28), and,

the sum of man's misery is even this, that he feel himself crushed under the Juggernaut wheels, and know that Juggernaut is no divinity, but a dead mechanical idol.

Now this is specially the misery which has fallen on man in our Era. Belief, Faith has well-nigh vanished from the world. The youth on awakening in this wondrous Universe, no longer finds a competent theory of its wonders. Time was, when if he asked himself, What is man, What are the duties of man? the answer stood ready written for him. But now the ancient 'ground-plan of the All' belies itself when brought into contact with reality. (Works XVIII, 29)

This seems mainly a Romantic reaction to the challenges of the Enlightenment, but the last sentence looks forward to the crisis of the mid-century when the crucial test for all knowledge became that of fact and fidelity to 'reality'. From empirical philosophy it is but a short step to the tyranny

of scientific evidence and proof. A letter from John Ruskin to Henry Acland, dated 24 May 1851, illustrates the impact of this short step:

You speak of the Flimsiness of your own faith. Mine, which was never strong, is being beaten into mere gold leaf, and flutters in weak rags from the letter of its old forms; but the only letters it can hold by at all are the old Evangelical formulae. If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses--and on the other side, these unhappy, blinking Puseyisms; men trying to do right and losing their very Humanity.
(Works XXXVI, 115)

The Victorian poet sought to emphasize the essence of man's 'Humanity', and to look deeper than man in society, to search out what Arnold called the 'real self' or 'the buried life', and what Dallas called 'the hidden soul'.¹⁰ It is not a coincidence that poetic purpose became clearer and more coherently expressed as the lines of attack became more firmly drawn. The 1850s and 1860s, the period of the greatest crisis of faith, was also the period of the firmest commitment of poetry to the problems of the age.

In On Heroes (1841), Carlyle outlined the position of the poet in the new scientific age. In 'The Hero as Poet', he wrote that 'the Hero as Divinity, the Hero as Prophet, are productions of old ages; not to be repeated in the new. They presuppose a certain rudeness of conception, which the progress of mere scientific knowledge puts an end to' (Works V, 78). 'I fancy there is in [the poet] the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher;--in one or the other degree, he could have been, he is all these' (Works V, 79). He goes on to link in particular the hero as Prophet and the hero as Poet, 'fundamentally indeed they are still the same' (Works V, 80). In 'Characteristics' he wrote that 'literature, is but a branch of Religion . . . in our time, it is the

only branch that still shews any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem' (Works XXVIII, 23). What these quotations suggest is that in the scientific age the poet is, or ought to be, the prophet of his times, and that there is in him a potential talent for the other disciplines of thought required by his age.

These ideas are even more clearly argued by Arnold in his lectures and essays in the latter half of the century. In 'The Study of Poetry' (1880) he wrote, 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' (CPW IX, 161-62). Poetry is made the essence of humane letters, of non-scientific, non-factual knowledge, and it is presented as the mediator between the rational material side of man and his emotional spiritual nature. This is what Arnold argues in Literature and Science (1885):

But now, says Professor Huxley, conceptions of the universe fatal to the notions held by our forefathers have been forced upon us by physical science. Grant to him that they are thus fatal, that the new conceptions must and will soon become current everywhere, and that every one will finally perceive them to be fatal to the beliefs of our forefathers. The need of humane letters, as they are truly called, because they serve the paramount desire in men that good should be ever present to them,--the need of humane letters, to establish a relation between the new conceptions, and our instinct for beauty, our instinct for conduct, is only more visible.

(CPW X, 66)

Poetry is the bridge between 'the new conceptions' and 'our instinct for beauty', or, as he said in 'The Study of Poetry': 'poetry . . . is thought and art in one' (CPW IX, 162). In 'Maurice de Guérin' (1863) he writes that 'the grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things

as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them' (CPW III, 12). These quotations relate the function of poetry to the needs of the age and suggest a concept of poetry which is primarily concerned with content and communication.

In an era of the fragmentation of knowledge and of the erosion of belief and faith, the power of poetry is 'its interpretative power'. Poetry can interpret the Universe and mediate between man's desire and instinct for goodness and beauty, for the infinite, and his knowledge and belief in fact and reality, the finite. To do this Arnold recognized, as Carlyle had implied, that the poet must become the source of a collective knowledge of his time, and that poetry must become a 'magister vitae' or 'criticism of life'.

The position of poetry throughout the early and mid Victorian period is inextricably tied to the material and intellectual environment. Poetry is defined by its relation to its society and by its service to that society. From the quotations used to illustrate the argument, it is clear that poetry was not sharply distinguished from the other arts, and generally poetry served as the test-case for the rest, being traditionally regarded as the most elevated and most deeply affecting, both intellectually and emotionally, of all the arts. Alba H. Warren's remarks about the 'curiously ambivalent attitude' of the Victorians to the arts include the observation that while the Victorians desired 'prophecy and revelation', they distrusted that which did not 'conform to law and fact'. I have tried to suggest that this ambivalence was recognized by the Victorians themselves, and that it determined the positions which the artists chose to adopt.

In the Victorian era the artist was forced to consider and to choose the relation which his art was to have to his age. The choice

is the choice of the individual artist, but in each case we see the artist consciously defining the meaning and value of his art against the background of his society. The dominant position of the Victorian poet is that of commitment to the problems of his era. Even such 'escapist' poetry as William Morris's The Earthly Paradise is offered as an artistic refuge from the ugliness of Victorian city life. It is offered not simply as an escape from life, but as the pleasurable part of life which should be recognized and valued. As Morris said in his lecture, 'The Gothic Revival, II' (1884):

Is art a little thing then, something which can be done without? It is not a little thing, for it means the pleasure of life: I am no prophet, so I will not say it cannot be done without, but at what expense! How can we forego this pleasure of life? Is it not a little question to ask ourselves are we to have art or not? It is a question between barbarism and civilisation, nay between progress and corruption--between humanity and brutality--nay I am wrong there; for the brutes are at least happy--but man without art will be unhappy.¹¹

Morris, like Arnold and Tennyson, questions the popular notions of civilisation and progress, and connects art to human happiness and fulness of life.

In the conclusion to 'The Study of Poetry', Arnold argues that good literature will never lose currency or supremacy, 'currency and supremacy are insured to it, not indeed by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper,--by the instinct of self-preservation in humanity' (CPW IX, 188). Poetry, and great art in general, are associated with human self-preservation. In other words, the arts maintain and express the essence of man's humanity--his soul or spirit. Yet in the context of the environment of the age, how was this service best to be rendered? This was the question which the poets

had to face and which produced such a variety of answers--from the faraway beauty of The Earthly Paradise, or the lyrical technical beauty of Tennyson's early verse, to the social and prosaic realism of Browning's The Inn Album.

The Victorian age is unique in that it produced the first society in which the artist was forced to come to terms with an industrial civilisation and a new mass audience. The sense of a culture shock is unmistakable, and throughout the period one finds the artist attempting to define and to relate to an ever changing and increasingly incoherent universe. Values, beliefs, and shared assumptions were shaken and blurred so that the artist could no longer work within a common consciousness. William A. Madden puts the matter concisely in 'The Burden of the Artist' (1959):

at the very moment when great political, social, and technological changes both furnished the material basis for and placed a premium upon greater mutual understanding and sympathy, the necessary cultural basis for such an exchange was disappearing. So far as the arts were concerned, the resulting uncertainty showed itself first in poetry and affected it most deeply, since language, even when exploited for aesthetic purposes, depends more than do the media of the other arts upon a common fund of emotional, conceptual, and symbolic references, and by 1859 this common fund was no longer available. (pp. 249-50)

The Victorian poet had no firm common centre of belief, no tradition, through which to communicate his vision beyond the physical aspects of life or beyond the most superficial and common emotions and thoughts. Yet this very breakdown of 'the ancient "ground-plan of the All"' provided a high function for poetry in an age which questioned its value and utility. At no other time had poetry been regarded as a successor to religion, as a spiritual and intellectual deliverer of an

age. Poetry was to express and promote the essential qualities of man, providing an adequate interpretation of human nature 'politically, socially, religiously, morally developed--in its completest and most harmonious development in all these directions', and also an 'adequate interpretation of [the] age' ('On the Modern Element in Literature', CPW I, 28, 22).

This high function was frustrated by several problems. First, there was the problem of communication. On what basis was the poet to build his interpretation so that his audience could accept and share it--on some widely accepted poetic tradition, on the basis of contemporary subjects, on factual or historical subjects? Secondly, the character of thought in the age was practical and factual, and imaginative discourse was distrusted or not regarded seriously. Thirdly, poetry, and art in general, had to come to terms with a new mass audience whose tastes were largely uncultivated. In his Preface to the First Edition of Modern Painters (1843), Ruskin gave his reason for writing the work as just this decline in public taste, 'But when public taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day, and when the press universally exerts such power as it possesses to direct the feeling of the nation more completely to all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art [he seeks to point out] the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True' (Works III, 4).

This last quotation suggests another important factor in the position of poetry in the age. Ruskin's point is very similar to Arnold's in his conclusion to 'The Study of Poetry'. Arnold also stresses the decline of public taste and the isolation of the artist and the exponent of true culture: 'Even if good literature entirely lost currency with the world, it would still be abundantly worth while

to continue to enjoy it by oneself' (my emphasis). Throughout the age there is a tension between the artist and his concept of art as a technique and as a means of personal expression, and his responsibility to his audience and his relation to the universe outside himself. The ambiguous position of poetry in the Victorian age forced the poet to re-examine the values and functions of poetry, and in particular, to bring its theory back into contact with the reality of his era, and to accept that by choosing one or other position (personal expression or social responsibility) he imposed limitations upon his art or upon the extent of his audience.

B. THE LIMITATIONS OF ROMANTIC POETIC THEORY AND THE
VICTORIAN REINTERPRETATION OF POETRY

Living in a godless age amidst drab, crowded cities and smoking factories, Victorian poets and critics felt sharply alienated from the pantheistic pastoralism of their Romantic predecessors.

Lawrence J. Starzyk, The Imprisoned Splendor (1977), Preface

The developments and changes which took place in poetry and poetic theory between Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1801) and Arnold's Preface to Poems (1853) are complex and diverse. To attempt to sketch such changes with any degree of economy and clarity, it is necessary to resort to generalizations. As in the previous section, I am aware that there must always be exceptions and qualifications, particularly with a movement as difficult to define as Romanticism.

The milieu of the age produced an orientation in Victorian theory towards the age and its requirements, and so promoted a theory of poetry which was essentially pragmatic. Poets and critics tended to look outward, away from the poem as a work of art, to the poem's effect upon and value for the reader. The reasons for this have already been discussed: for poetry to assume a central position in Victorian society the poet had to convince that society of the value and use of his art, of his 'practical intentions', as Arnold put it.

Victorian poetry and poetic theory have been attacked for concerning themselves with what W.B. Yeats called 'impurities', for their lack of direction, and their confusing diversity. Abrams sees the Romantics as

creating a change in the orientation of poetic theory, of producing a 'shift of focus of critical interest from audience to artist' (Mirror and the Lamp, p. 21). The Romantics are seen as producing a new concept of art, while the Victorians are regarded as treading water or as returning to the old currents of pragmatic theories. The best that can be said of the Victorians would seem to be that, 'Although they did not bequeath an original or even a coherent body of critical theory to future ages, they at least preserved the virtues upon which critics had found common ground in the past' (William A. Jamison, Arnold and the Romantics, p. 14). In this section I shall argue that the Victorians did a great deal more than this.

As I said earlier, the age cannot be regarded as a static whole: though the first half of the century may indeed be characterized by a confusion of theories, by the mid-century, the 1850s and 1860s, one can discern a new direction and force in poetry. There is a clear, though gradual, movement away from the Romantic tradition towards a poetry, and a theory of poetry, created from a reaction to or against the age. It is this engagement of poets and critics with the problems and tensions of their era which forms the core of Victorian poetic theory. Although Victorian critics advocated a poetic theory which was primarily pragmatic, Victorian poets did not neglect the art of poetry, the creation of a poem as a work of art. As Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' shows, poets were aware of a tension between their duty to their audience or society, and their own impulse to a total absorption in their world of art. This tension served to broaden what was understood by poetry, and provoked a rich diversity of ideas about the nature and function of poetry, as well as great variety and experimentation in the poetry itself (Browning and Tennyson are particularly good examples of this).

The pragmatic impulse of Victorian poetic theory can be seen as an attempt to establish and define the relation of poetry to the modern world. It is an attempt to define the value of poetry in practical terms since practical terms had become the dominant language of the times. In this sense then, the pragmatism of Victorian poetry is more specific and more complex than the simple use of the poem as 'an instrument for getting something done' (Abrams, p. 15). Poetry is regarded in the context of the age: it is presented as an essential part of the life of that age, satisfying wants which it alone can now fulfil.

It is worth remembering what Carlyle wrote in 'Characteristics' (1831)--'Never since the beginning of Time was there . . . so intensely self-conscious a Society'. 'Change, or the inevitable approach of Change, is manifest everywhere.' Carlyle states succinctly a theme which is ubiquitous in Victorian writings. The Victorian age experienced the cumulative effects of the various revolutions--social, political, and intellectual--which shook Europe in the eighteenth century, and which continued into the nineteenth. There was no period of respite, and the increasing rapidity, particularly of technological and scientific discoveries, forced the Victorians to be acutely aware of change. 'Change, or the inevitable approach of Change' was recognized as that which characterized the nineteenth century as a distinct historical era (the increased interest in history and historiography is directly connected to this). The key word here is 'distinct'. The Victorians felt that they lived in a new age; that they had advanced so rapidly that almost all continuity with the past had been left behind. Arnold wrote to Clough of dispensing with the age and with friends, 'better that, than be sucked for an hour even into the Time Stream' (Letters to Clough, p. 95). It is this sense of living in a new era which impelled

the poets to re-examine their art by viewing it in the context of modern life. Again and again critics begin their analysis of poetry by relating it to their age and the needs of their age. It is from this view-point that Romantic poetry was regarded as deficient: while the Romantics made the poet the centre of their poetic theory, the Victorians looked outward to society, to the changing and confusing aspect of their universe. The poet could no longer be sure that his imagination could produce, as Wordsworth said, an 'image of man and nature' which would be recognized and accepted as true by his audience.

The Victorian criticism of Romantic poetry was that it could not relate the poet's subjective vision to objective reality by any means acceptable to the Victorian intellect. Arnold, in his essay 'Heinrich Heine' (1863), expressed this sense of the inadequacy of the Romantics by contrasting their achievement in exploring 'the inward life' with their failure to 'apply modern ideas to life':

The greatest of them [the English Romantic poets], Wordsworth, retired (in Middle-Age phrase) into a monastery. I mean, he plunged himself in the inward life, he voluntarily cut himself off from the modern spirit. Coleridge took to opium. Scott became the historiographer-royal of feudalism. Keats passionately gave himself up to a sensuous genius, to his faculty for interpreting nature; and he died of consumption at twenty-five. Wordsworth, Scott, and Keats have left admirable works. . . . But their works have this defect, --they do not belong to that which is the main current of the literature of modern epochs, they do not apply modern ideas to life; they constitute, therefore, minor currents, and all other literary work of our day, however popular, which has the same defect, also constitutes but a minor current. (CPW III, 121-22)

The task of the Victorian poet is to 'apply modern ideas to life'. Arnold's concern with religion, science, and politics, his aim to make poetry a 'magister vitae', is not a desire to use poetry as a vehicle

for alien disciplines, but rather a recognition that the poet himself must create an 'Idea of the world' in his poetry. This is the main point of Arnold's essay: in modern times the objective world has no relation to the traditional interpretations put upon it:

Modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules, which have come to them from times not modern. . . . The modern spirit is now awake almost everywhere; the sense of want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit . . . almost every one now perceives. (CPW III, 109)

By applying modern ideas to life poetry may become a compendium in which to reunite man's fragmented knowledge of himself and his universe.

It is important to stress that while Victorian critics and poets seem to concern themselves almost exclusively with content, with what the poem says, they are really attempting to come to an understanding of the relation of poetry to the modern age. How can the poet communicate his vision to his audience when no reality is accepted but that of the material world? Where is the truth of poetry in an age of fact? Although modern critics have recognized a new critical tendency in the Victorian period, they have tended to concentrate on the expansion of Victorian poetry into other fields of thought, and to regard this as some lamentable aberration on the part of poets and critics. They have generally failed to recognize that this expansion was a necessary part of the creation of an original poetic theory which attempted to solve the problem of a lack of a shared imaginative vision of the universe. For example, Abrams says:

It was only in the early Victorian period, when all discourse was explicitly or tacitly thrown into the two exhaustive modes of imaginative and rational, expressive and assertive, that religion, as a consequence, was converted into poetry, and poetry into a kind of religion. (Mirror and the Lamp, p. 335)

William A. Madden in 'The Burden of the Artist', writes,

there emerged the first signs of a new kind of criticism, characterized by the tendency to make of poetry and art an absolute as the carriers of sacred values which, they were convinced, had been jeopardized by the breakdown of traditional safeguards against an impending savagery. (p. 250)

Although this functional or pragmatic tendency in Victorian criticism is strong, it is inseparable from the poet's search for a new basis for his art because of the absence of a common centre of belief through which to communicate his visions. In other words, the Victorian poet's interest in religion, philosophy, or science, and his didactic or pragmatic tendency, should be recognized as an attempt to create a new aesthetic: to form within his poem a coherent vision of life.

A.H. Hallam touches on this want of a common centre of belief in his sensitive review of Tennyson's lyrical poems in the Englishman's Magazine (1831). He considers poetry in the context of 'our national progress' and notes that the 'poetic disposition' is no longer unified,¹² and that the poet is alienated, writing in a personal idiosyncratic manner:

Hence the melancholy, which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry; hence that return of the mind upon itself, and the habit of seeking relief in idiosyncrasies rather than community of interest.
(p. 620)¹³

What is of particular interest, however, is that he then goes on to point out a problem facing the Victorian poets which their Romantic predecessors did not have to contend with. It is possible that Hallam may be specifically correcting Wordsworth's views on the future of poetry in an age of science and technology.¹⁴ Hallam writes:

We have indeed seen it urged in some of our fashionable publications that the diffusion of poetry must necessarily be in the direct ratio of the diffusion of machinery, because a highly civilised people must have new objects of interest, and thus a new field will be opened to description. But this notable argument forgets that against this objective amelioration may be set the decrease of subjective power, arising from a prevalence of social activity, and a continual absorption of the higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life. (p. 620)

This is what was argued in the first section of this chapter: that the age was primarily social and practical in outlook and hostile to a serious consideration of imaginative literature, particularly poetry, which demands the exercise of 'subjective power'.

Hallam also notes the belief, which was to continue into the mid-century, and which Arnold was to attack, that poetry should deal with the 'new objects of interest'. But clearly he does not see subject-matter as being the main problem facing poets: the main problem is the widening gap between the subjective and objective vision, and the decrease of the subjective power. Harry Levin in his Contexts of Criticism (1957) expressed the problem as the need to 'build a road between Adam and Macadam' (p. 184), between man's elemental human nature, his essence of being, and the 'continual absorption of [his] higher feelings into the palpable interests of ordinary life', into the industrial, scientific, material interests of his modern environment.

The Romantic poets had of course already been at work on such a road. Abrams in defining Romantic poetic theory notes,

[the Romantic] attempt to overcome the sense of man's alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity, and motion. To establish that man shares his own life with

nature was to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists, and at the same time most effectively to tie man back into his milieu.

(Mirror and the Lamp, p. 65)

For the Victorians, however, 'the cleavage between subject and object' took a very different form and demanded a very different treatment. Carlyle in his 'Signs of the Times' (1829) observed that 'Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also' (Works XVII, 60). 'Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements . . . do they struggle' (Works XVII, 63). Carlyle's remarks are worthy of close study; clearly they are not the words of a lone prophet but an early expression of similar views held by, for example, Hallam, Ruskin, and Morris.

The Romantics attempted 'to revitalize the material and mechanical universe which had emerged from the philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes, and which had been recently dramatized by the theories of Hartley and the French mechanists of the latter eighteenth century' (Mirror and the Lamp, p. 65). Carlyle, however, stresses that 'not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery'. His main point is that it is man himself who has grown mechanical. Like Hallam, Carlyle notes that man's 'higher feelings' are absorbed into 'external combinations and arrangements'. Carlyle includes the specific point that 'they have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind' (my emphasis). If this remark is compared to Wordsworth's Preface to The Excursion the difference between the Romantic and Victorian outlook comes into sharp focus:

How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external World
Is fitted.

(my emphasis, 63-66)

For the Romantic poets the secure base was the subjective, the 'individual Mind', which reflected the common traits of man and human nature. From this base the poet, and mankind in general, had the power to unite with the natural world outside himself. Of a 'Babe', Wordsworth writes:

No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
 Along his infant veins are interfused
 The gravitation and the filial bond
 Of nature that connect him with the world.
 (Prelude, 1850, II, 241-44)

He goes on:

For feeling has to him imparted power
 That through the growing faculties of sense
 Both like an agent of the one great Mind
 Create, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds.--Such, verily, is the first
Poetic spirit of our human life,
 By uniform control of after years,
 In most, abated or suppressed; in some,
 Through every change of growth and of decay,
 Pre-eminent till death.
 (my emphasis, II, 255-65)

The Victorian poet had no such secure base: he could not assume a common 'poetic spirit of our human life', nor could he assume that the world of nature would be commonly perceived as the central manifestation of the objective universe.

In the Preface to The Excursion, Wordsworth particularly stressed the point that his poetry was a joint 'creation' of the subjective 'individual Mind' and the objective 'external World'. It is just this balance which the Victorian poet could not maintain and because of this

the basis of communication had broken down. The factual/objective universe shared by both poet and audience was not now felt to be primarily the world of nature. Moreover, the imaginative/subjective understanding of the universe had also altered, so much so that the poet's interpretation could not be accepted as a shared experience but only as a private vision.

The gulf between the Romantic concept of nature and that of the Victorians is obvious when one compares the passage quoted from The Prelude with Arnold's poem 'Religious Isolation' (the title itself is significant):

What though the holy secret, which moulds thee,
Moulds not the solid earth? though never winds
Have whisper'd it to the complaining sea,

Nature's great law, and the law of all men's minds?--
To its own impulse every creature stirs;
Live by thy light, and earth will live by hers!
(9-14)

William A. Jamison in Arnold and the Romantics, comments, 'Since the laws of nature do not correspond to the laws of man, the poet will depart from reality if he imposes upon the natural world an intellectual or moral pattern' (p. 26). The problems which this created for poets continuing to work in the Romantic tradition came to the fore in the 1830s and 1840s.

M.H. Abrams, having observed the orientation of Romantic poetic theory to the poet says that, 'the habitual reference to the emotions and processes of the poet's mind for the source of poetry altered drastically the established solutions to that basic problem of aesthetics, the discrepancy between the subject-matter in poetry and the objects found in experience' (Mirror and the Lamp, p. 53). By the

1830s this discrepancy was particularly sharp. In the Romantic period, the poet was part of the community, sharing a common environment, interpreting that environment in a manner sympathetic to the beliefs of his audience, and writing in a language familiar to his audience. For example, Wordsworth's intention in the Lyrical Ballads (1801) 'was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men' (Works, p. 734b). Coleridge makes it clear that the poet's style is regulated by the laws of language itself: 'But if it be asked by what principles the poet is to regulate his own style, if he do not adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road, or ploughfield? I reply: by the principles, the ignorance or neglect of which would convict him of being no poet, but a silly or presumptuous usurper of the name! By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology!' ¹⁵ Wordsworth's poet 'is a man speaking to men' (Works, p. 737a).

It is clear, then, that although Romantic poetic theory always threatened to destroy the relationship of the poem to the external universe (because of the emphasis put upon the 'emotions and processes of the poet's mind for the source of poetry', as Abrams put it), the full extent of this threat was not realised until the early Victorian period. The Victorian continuation of Romantic theory narrowed the universe to that of the poet's emotional perception, overstressed the spontaneity of composition, and reduced poetry to soliloquy. The audience and the objective universe were all but eliminated, and, since the poem had no connection to anything outwith the poet himself, the poet need have no regard for conventions, rules, or forms (which not only preserve the integrity of the art-form, but also provide a

recognizable frame and order necessary for communication). These are of course extreme statements, but they are not far removed from John Stuart Mill's reworking of Romantic theory, and of Wordsworthian theory in particular, or from the charges of extreme subjectivity and formlessness levelled by Arnold against contemporary poetry in the Preface (1853).¹⁶

In 1833, J.S. Mill wrote that 'all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy' ('What is Poetry?', p. 65), and 'what is poetry, but the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself?' ('The Two Kinds of Poetry', p. 715). In 'The Two Kinds of Poetry' Mill makes true poetry the lyrical spontaneous expression of feeling, so that Shelley is held to be 'the poet born' while Wordsworth is 'the poet made'. Wordsworth's poetry 'has little even of the appearance of spontaneousness: the well is never so full that it overflows' (p. 718). 'The poetry is not in the object itself . . . but in the state of mind' of the poet who looks at it ('What is Poetry?', p. 63). Poetry must be true not to the object but to 'the human emotion' (ibid., p. 64). From these remarks it is clear that the objective universe is of negligible importance to Mill's poetic theory. This, as I said, was inherent in the theory of the Romantics, but the early Victorian interpretation loses the fine balance which the Romantics managed to maintain between their objective and subjective worlds.¹⁷ In short, while the Romantic poet bonded his imaginative vision of the universe to objective reality by a faith in the spiritual nature of man, and an answering spiritual quality in the world of nature, the Victorian poet faced a virtual disintegration of the elements which constitute an understanding of his art.

The Victorian poet had to face the problem of what Hallam called 'the decrease of subjective power', or of what Ruskin recognized as a complete rejection of a spiritual force in man or the world: 'There is

a Supreme Ruler, no question of it, only He cannot rule'. He goes on:

Now this form of unbelief in God is connected with, and necessarily productive of, a precisely equal unbelief in man.

Co-relative with the assertion, 'There is a foolish God,' is the assertion, 'There is a brutish man.' 'As no laws but those of the Devil are practicable in the world, so no impulses but those of the brute' (says the modern political economist) 'are appealable to in the world. Faith, generosity, honesty, zeal, and self-sacrifice are poetical phrases. None of these things can, in reality, be counted upon; there is no truth in man which can be used as a moving or productive power. All motive force in him is essentially brutish, covetous, or contentious.'¹⁸

What Ruskin's remarks suggest, particularly when considered in the light of what has been written in the previous section on the limited vision and practical social outlook of the Victorians, is that the Victorian poet had to do more than bridge the gap between subject and object: he had to break down the now intervening barrier of a purely physical, materialistic vision of life.

Ruskin's 'modern political economist' denies that man or the universe has a soul, a being or existence beyond the visible and material. From such a view-point there can be no 'creator and receiver', no 'alliance' of man and nature, and no 'poetic spirit of our human life' (Wordsworth), since it is the middle-ground, what I have called the intervening barrier, which has become the only reality. In the passage from Ruskin, 'poetical phrases' are synonymous with make-believe. This last phrase suggests another problem of communication between poet and audience--the problem of poetic language. Earlier I quoted from Wordsworth and Coleridge to argue that the Romantics wrote in a language familiar to their audience, a language which connected the subject of the poem to the experience of everyday life. In the Victorian period, the form of poetry--its language,

rhyme, and metre--was felt to be inappropriate for the times and distanced from real life (this will be examined in more detail in the next chapter).

The problems of this lack of correspondence between the elements which make up an understanding of poetry were greatly increased by the suddenness with which the Romantic tradition was found to be no longer a living force. Frederic Harrison in Studies in Early Victorian Literature (1895) writes:

In the year of the Queen's accession to the throne, the great writers of the early part of this century were either dead or silent. Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Lamb, Sheridan, Hazlitt, Mackintosh, Crabbe, and Cobbett, were gone. There was still living in 1837, Wordsworth, Southey, Campbell, Moore, Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, De Quincey, Miss Edgeworth, Miss Mitford, Leigh Hunt, Brougham, Samuel Rogers:--living, it is true, but they had all produced their important work at some earlier date. (pp. 2-3)

Of those still living in 1837, several names which Harrison lists would now scarcely receive a mention. What is remarkable is the clarity of the break between the Romantic and Victorian periods: the demise of the greatest of the Romantics occurred within a startlingly short space of time. Keats died in 1821, Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824, Scott in 1832, and Coleridge in 1834. Ifor Evans in English Poetry in the Later Nineteenth Century (1966), makes the comment that 'the years 1821-1834 mark one of the most melancholy interludes of mortality in the history of English poetry. The first manifestation of English romanticism comes to an abrupt end, not through any exhaustion of purposes but by the removal of its poets with calamitous swiftness' (p. 1). He goes on to say that 'by 1830 all that was effective in the movement of English romanticism that began with Wordsworth and Coleridge had come to an end' (p. 2).

What Harrison and Evans both draw attention to is the absence of an active leadership straddling the two eras, and hence the lack of any forceful development of Romantic poetic theory progressing into the Victorian age.

In what seems to be an assessment of the situation of poetry in the 1830s and 1840s, Browning, in his 'Essay on Shelley' (1851), regards his contemporaries as working with 'the straw of last year's harvest', and of producing no more than an 'intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago' (my emphasis, p. 68). What Browning particularly stresses is that the mode of poetry he is describing is of a past age; that the productive work (the 'harvest', the 'food swallowed'), has been done. In other words, Browning observes that there has been no ongoing process of development, but rather a static and debased reworking of what is now merely 'the shadow of a reality'. In the 'Essay' Browning returns again and again to the idea that the poet must maintain the correspondence with reality:

For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilised, but the raw material it operates upon, must remain. (my emphasis, p. 67)

Arnold in his 'On the Modern Element in Literature' writes that 'an intellectual deliverance is the peculiar demand of these ages which are called modern. . . . Such a deliverance is emphatically, whether we will or no, the demand of the age in which we ourselves live' (CPW I, 19). He goes on, 'the deliverance consists in man's comprehension of this present and past' (my emphasis, CPW I, 20). Both poets use the words 'comprehension' and 'intellectual' (Browning speaks of the 'intellectual

rumination of food swallowed long ago'). In effect, both Arnold and Browning reject the Romantic tradition because it can no longer provide an adequate interpretation of the world as experienced in the Victorian era, and, in particular, it can no longer satisfy man's intellect, an intellect now dominated by practical concerns and scientific thought.

The limitations of Romantic poetic theory forced Victorian poets and critics to form their own interpretation of poetry. Their main concern was not to define poetry as an art-form but to express an idea or concept of poetry which would establish its place, and the place of art in general, in Victorian civilisation. When the Victorians discuss poetry they discuss an ideal poetry. Carlyle in his essay 'Goethe' (1828) very clearly distinguishes between high poetry and popular poetry:

Of the poetry which supplies spouting-clubs, and circulates in circulating libraries, we speak not here. That is quite another species; which has circulated, and will circulate, and ought to circulate, in all times. . . . We speak of that Poetry which Masters write, which aims not at 'furnishing a languid mind with fantastic shows and indolent emotions', but at incorporating the everlasting Reason of man in forms visible to his Sense, and suitable to it: and of this we say, that to know it is no slight task; but rather that, being the essence of all science, it requires the purest of all study for knowing it.

(Works XXVI, 255)

The Victorian concern is with poetry as 'high literature', a 'literature which seeks to be true to the modern situation, to a culture without a metaphysically objective morality'.¹⁹ Poetry is regarded as a quality, as the essence of art and culture, rather than as a specific art-form.²⁰

Northrop Frye, in The Critical Path (1973), writes, 'Man lives . . . in two worlds. There is the world he is actually in, the world of nature or his objective environment, and there is the civilization he is trying

to build or maintain out of his environment, a world rooted in the conception of art' (pp. 56-57). 'The arts are witnesses to something more than a rest after labor. . . . At the basis of human existence is the instinct for social coherence' (p. 170). This 'instinct for social coherence', the desire to maintain a civilisation out of a chaotic objective environment, is what the Victorians looked to poetry to fulfil. Their concern is not with poetry as entertainment, but with poetry as a focus for stability and order.

In many ways this exalted view of poetry was inherited from the Romantics. For example, Coleridge's definition of poetry and the poet in his Biographia Literaria emphasizes the same qualities of synthesis and harmony which the Victorians sought in poetry:

What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other . . .

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. . . . He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.²¹

Coleridge, however, was careful to distinguish between this general concept of poetry and his more precise definition of a poem, the art-form of poetry (ibid., pp. 171-74). Because the Victorian critics failed to do this, poetry is understood as a quality which produces certain effects and performs certain functions, but which remains vague and undefined as a specific form of art. For example, as I demonstrated earlier, Arnold uses the words poetry, criticism, literature, culture, and art rather loosely for the idea of something which, as Northrop Frye put it, maintains civilisation and social coherence in a chaotic

environment, and which also expresses and communicates the spiritual qualities of man and his universe.

The 'curiously ambivalent attitude towards art' shown by the Victorians, an attitude which 'sanctioned prophecy and revelation but required that they conform to law and fact', can partly be explained by the Victorian attitude to their Romantic inheritance. While the Victorians accepted, and even expanded, the Romantic concept of the value and importance of the poet and his poetry, they were forced to reject Romantic poetic theory as the means of producing the kind of poetry capable of fulfilling this high concept of poetry. The broken relationships between the elements which make up an understanding of poetry were accentuated by the emphasis which Victorian critics put upon the centrality of poetry to fulness of life and to a spiritually healthy society and civilisation.

Since Victorian poetic theory was pragmatic, focusing upon the audience rather than the poet, it demanded the fullest powers of poetic communication to achieve its ideal of poetry. The Victorian attempt to solve this dilemma resulted in a concentration on the subject-matter of poetry. This does not mean that the poem was regarded as no more than a container, as W.B. Yeats suggested by his remark 'that Swinburne in one way, Browning in another, and Tennyson in a third, had filled their work with what I called "impurities", curiosities about politics, about science, about history, about religion' (Autobiographies, p. 167). The importance of Robert Browning to this aspect of the argument is immense and will be examined in the next section, however at this point a short comment by Philip Drew on Browning's poetry is particularly helpful-- 'to grasp Browning's achievement we must think again about what we mean by poetry' (Poetry of Browning, p. 117). This section of my argument,

'The Victorian Reinterpretation of Poetry', aims to counteract the failure to recognize this reinterpretation, a failure which has led to a misunderstanding of Victorian poetry and poetic theory, and also to a misunderstanding of Browning's achievement. Drew writes:

If, for example, we think of the poet's task as mainly the patterning of words so that they react unpredictably and produce infinitely receding reverberations we shall find it hard to think of Browning as a poet at all, for he takes comparatively little pains to secure effects of this kind. . . . we [must] find our definition of what a poem is on Homer, Virgil and Dante, as well as on Hopkins and Eliot and Emily Dickinson and 'H.D.' and E.E. Cummings.
(Poetry of Browning, p. 117)

The Victorians seldom gave a 'definition of what a poem is' and this is because their main interest lay in the broader concerns of poetics. The meaning of this statement will become clear as this section progresses.

I have deliberately stressed Philip Drew's remarks that to understand Browning's poetry we must approach it with an open and broad idea of what poetry is, since without this approach not only is Browning's poetry liable to be misunderstood, but all of Victorian poetics. It is on this question of approach that I reluctantly disagree with Peter Allan Dale's overall assessment of Victorian critical theory. Dale's book, The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History: Carlyle, Arnold, Pater (1977), is of exceptional interest, particularly in the way in which it demonstrates the coherence of Victorian critical thought. He argues that there is a 'pervasive intellectual concern . . . throughout the critical writing . . . of the mid and later nineteenth century . . . with the historical process and its philosophical meaning' (p. 2). The philosophical and critical opinions of Carlyle, Arnold and Pater have 'a kind of unity deriving from the "spirit of the age" and making for a characteristically Victorian

approach to literary and artistic problems' (pp. 1-2).

He seems to develop a line of argument exactly concurring with my own. He writes:

what had always before been a minor motif in criticism had become a dominant assumption; from 1830 onward few English critics would have considered it possible to talk meaningfully of poetry without taking into account the 'age'. . . . Above all, as would be expected in a period preoccupied with the decline of religious belief, nineteenth-century critics wanted to know what the age gave the poet to believe in and how that belief found expression in his poetry. (p. 10)

It is my contention that Victorian poetry was regarded very much in the context of the age, and that the most characteristic feature of Victorian poetry and poetic theory is their inclusiveness, their involvement with all that concerned the age. Poetry is interpreted not as being an art-form independent or detached from life, but as something essential to life and closely involved with the problems of living. I shall develop these ideas later, but it is obvious that 'if . . . we think of the poet's task as mainly the patterning of words' then we must regard Victorian poetry as being full of impurities.

The dominance of close textual study and of the aesthetic approach in modern critical theory has prejudiced, and even blinded, us to a sympathetic understanding of Victorian aims and interests in poetry. Dale, for example, frames his discussion by negating the very qualities which characterize Victorian poetry--involvement in the concerns of the times, and breadth of interest. He notes a 'dialectical' orientation in English criticism from 1830 down to the mid century, and says:

All intellectual energy that was not devoted to securing a coherent meaning to life, all energy spent on mere aesthetic embellishment, was energy criminally wasted. It is no doubt proper to deplore this development, as

Saintsbury does, as an impoverishment of criticism, and no doubt Carlyle must come in for a lion's share of the blame. What I propose to do, however, is to take this dialectical preoccupation of Carlyle's as it is, without further regret for its inadequacies, and consider how in its interpretation of poetry it moves intellectually beyond English Romanticism to become a necessary adjustment in assumptions about the metaphysical status of poetry, preliminary to the renewal of genuinely aesthetical concerns in the criticism of the later nineteenth century.

(my emphasis, p. 24)

This interpretation more or less accepts the standard view that the core of early and mid Victorian poetic theory impoverished itself by seeking 'a coherent meaning to life' and neglecting 'genuinely aesthetical concerns'. He concludes his study: 'By undermining the concept of belief itself the historicist outlook at the same time undermined the ancient assumption that poetry is a variety of truth or knowledge, closer to philosophy than to history. In this its tendency was ever to compel critical attention back upon more specifically aesthetic criteria more suitably applied elsewhere' (p. 255).

This seems to me to suggest that the major Victorian poets and critics indulged in an aberration which eventually led them back onto the correct path of using 'specifically aesthetic criteria for the discussion of art'. Both his introduction and conclusion assume that the Victorian poets who engaged their art in the quest for a coherent meaning to life impoverished their art or produced inadequate art. He seems to suggest that it is their failure in this quest which leads to 'The Enrichment of Critical Thought'. Yet surely this interpretation is a sign of our failure to 'think again about what we mean by poetry'. Why must 'more specifically aesthetic criteria for the discussion of art' necessarily be regarded as the correct standards or principles by which to judge all art? By taking this interpretation, Dale in fact

turns much of his argument upside down. For example, earlier in his book he actually argues that a less specifically aesthetic approach to literature enriches critical thought:

People who think seriously about literature do not . . . confine themselves to their own special intellectual preserve labelled 'aesthetic' or 'critical'. Inevitably they wander afield and more likely than not find their critical thought the richer for the excursions. (pp. 8-9)

He says that his reason for selecting Carlyle, Arnold and Pater 'lies in the great breadth and seriousness of the intellectual interests they have brought to the study of literature', and also 'in their sensitivity to the main movement of contemporary thought' (p. 21). It is exactly these qualities which I regard as the essence of the Victorian achievement in poetry and poetic theory.

I have argued that the Victorians sought to reach an understanding of the concept of poetry rather than to define what they understood by a poem. In this way, Victorian poetic theory concerned itself with the broader relationships of poet to audience, and poem to Universe, rather than with the internal elements of the poem itself. This stemmed from their acute awareness of their age, and particularly of their age as being a time of transition. F.G. Stephens in The Germ (1850) writes, 'if we are not to depart from established principles, how are we to advance at all? Are we to remain still? Remember, no thing remains still; that which does not advance falls backward' (p. 59), and, 'if we have entered upon a new age, a new cycle of man, of which there are many signs, let us have it unstained by this vice of sensuality of mind' (p. 63). Stephens looks outward from the poem to the question of how poetry relates to the age and to the life of man in that age. Like Browning, Stephens is concerned with defining the nature of poetry at

his particular point in time.

The Victorian perspective of poetry is wide and distanced; it is akin to the broad theories of the scientists of the age which consider vast tracks of time and space. While Coleridge associated biology with poetry, and compared a poem to a plant, looking closely at the organic growth and composition of a single unit (plant or poem), the Victorians regarded poetry rather as Darwin regarded nature, looking beyond the individual example to reach a broader understanding of a whole species. The individual example is determined by its evolution into the appropriate form for its survival at that particular time.²²

This analogy between science and poetry is not over-fanciful. The influence of scientific thought on Victorian poetry, and on art in general, is immense, and is part of the Victorian endeavour to reinterpret poetry in a scientific age. F.G. Stephens in the same article, wrote: 'The sciences have become almost exact within the present century' and this has been done 'by being precise in the search after truth'. 'If this adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory--to begin at the beginning and not to fly to the end,--has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts?' (p. 61). E.S. Dallas called his outline of critical theory The Gay Science, and acknowledged Arnold's similar use of the word 'criticism' 'as a synonym not only for science, but even for poetry' (I, 9). Dallas himself comes to present poetry as a science. He writes: 'There is a science of biology, and yet no one can define what is life. The science of life is but a science of the laws and conditions under which it is manifested. . . . And so there may be a science of poetry and the fine arts, although the theme of art is the Unknown, and its motive power is the Hidden Soul' (I, 334). Poetry, then, is regarded in a scientific

manner. The understanding of poetry, and of art generally, comes from an enlarged perspective, a broad vision, rather than a narrowly aesthetic one.

This enlarged perspective affected both the theory and the practice of art. For example, Humphry House, writing about Victorian landscape painting, discusses 'the appearance in the pictures of a "limitless" Nature: every effort is made to put everything in, as if the whole practical external world could be crowded onto a canvas. The desire for this limitless effect was so strong that the painter Henry Holliday actually made a special kind of huge stereoscope to increase his field of vision as widely as possible--a device with an exactly opposite purpose to that of the eighteenth-century landscape mirror, which was designed to reduce the field of vision to a manageable composition' (All in Due Time, p. 142). The Victorian poets and artists are often seen as being mainly concerned with scientific fidelity to external facts. Humphry House accuses them of 'the imposition of feeling as an afterthought upon literalness' (p. 145). By this he means, for example, Landseer's anthropomorphizing of animals, or the excessive sentimentality of John Everett Millais' 'Bubbles'. He sees this 'imposition of feeling' as 'a means of infusing into what was otherwise a purely materialistic "scientific" representation of the external world some kind of "spirit"' (p. 147).

The derogatory tone of Humphry House's remarks suggests that this Victorian characteristic should be regarded as unfortunate, but in fact what he observes is the failure in several works of art to achieve a synthesis of artistic spiritual insight and scientific fidelity to reality. This failure does not invalidate the principle or theory behind these attempts. Arnold, in a letter to Clough of 1848-49,

described Browning as 'a man with a moderate gift passionately desiring movement and fulness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness' (Letters to Clough, p. 97). This criticism is similar to the description above of Victorian landscape painting. G.K. Chesterton's comment on The Ring and the Book is that it is 'the very essence of Browning's genius' that the poem should be 'the enormous multiplication of a small theme. It is the extreme of idle criticism to complain that the story is a current and sordid story, for the whole object of the poem is to show what infinities of spiritual good and evil a current and sordid story may contain' (Robert Browning, p. 167). Chesterton, in effect, notes the success of Browning's attempt to fuse spiritual insight and factual reality, and also the success of achieving 'movement and fulness' without lapsing into 'a confused multitudinousness'.

Browning's success, and the failures which Humphry House draws attention to, illustrate the same expanded view of art, and particularly of poetry, discussed above. Aubrey De Vere, in the Edinburgh Review (1849), described poetry as 'partaking at once of the nature both of Science and of Art, it spiritualises the outward world while it embodies the world of Thought' (p. 380). This more expansive, inclusive idea of poetry could be seen as an extension of the Romantic concept of poetic synthesis. Abrams, writing on this aspect of Coleridge's criticism, says, 'this is the appeal to inclusiveness as the criterion of poetic excellence--to the co-existence in a poem of "opposite or discordant qualities", provided that these have been blended or "reconciled" into unity by the synthetic power which Coleridge attributes to the imagination', (my emphasis, Mirror and the Lamp, p. 118). The Victorians extended this idea of synthetic power from something to be achieved 'in a poem', to something to be achieved by poetry as an all-inclusive mediatory discipline,

'partaking at once of the nature both of Science and of Art'. Yet by arguing that Victorian poets and critics looked beyond 'specifically aesthetic criteria for the discussion of art', I do not mean to suggest that they were blind to aesthetic criteria.

The Victorian concept of poetry in itself suggested more precise ideas on the 'definition of what a poem is'. It is obvious from what has been written above that the main constituent of the poem was regarded as being its subject. Henry Taylor in the Preface to Philip Van Artevelde (1834), which often sounds remarkably like Matthew Arnold's prefaces and essays, dismisses Shelley's poetry as 'so many gorgeously coloured clouds in an evening sky. Surpassingly beautiful they were whilst before [the reader's] eyes; but forasmuch as they had no relevancy to his life, past or future, the impression upon the memory barely survived that upon the senses' (p. xxiii). He condemns those who indulged in 'the mere luxuries of poetry' (p. xi), such poets 'wanted, in the first place subject matter. A feeling came more easily to them than a reflection' (pp. xi-xii). For Henry Taylor the main element of a poem is its subject: the music of the sound of words, rhyme, and rhythm, are of secondary interest ('mere luxuries of poetry'). The appeal of poetry is to the intellect and not primarily to the senses or to 'sensuality of mind', as F.G. Stephens put it.

Although Taylor's emphasis on subject-matter is characteristic of Victorian poetic thought, it is important to see that he is reacting to, and criticizing, another mode of poetry (mainly Shelley's kind of Romantic poetry). The essence and value of poetry is meaning or content, and this is regarded as something which emerges from the whole of the poem, not simply from its subject-matter. Carlyle writes that 'the grand point is to have a meaning, a genuine, deep, and noble one; the

proper form . . . best suited to the subject . . . will gather round it almost of its own accord' ('Goethe's Helena', 1825, Works XXVI, 149). In his essay 'The Hero as Poet', he defines poetry as 'a musical thought' (Works V, 83). 'Whatsoever is not sung is properly no Poem, but a piece of Prose cramped into jingling lines' (p. 90). Carlyle is typically vague and mystical but one can see that, like Coleridge, (whom he refers to in this essay, p. 90), and the German theorists, he upholds the organic idea of a poem. For example, Carlyle's remark that 'the proper form . . . best suited to the subject . . . will gather round it almost of its own accord', is very close to Coleridge's 'No work of true genius dares want its appropriate form, neither indeed is there any danger of this'.²³ Similarly, Arnold's statement that 'modern poetry can only subsist by its contents' (Letters to Clough, p. 124), is balanced by a deep concern for 'the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws' (CPW I, 19).

Victorian criticism must be read in its proper context: Taylor's phrase, 'the mere luxuries of poetry', or indeed the whole of Arnold's Preface of 1853, should be seen as parts of a debate, as sides of an argument, and not as complete and balanced statements on the Victorian concept of poetry. While the dialectical tendency in Victorian poetry and criticism has been recognized, the rhetorical element has not yet been properly appreciated. The emphasis on subject-matter was not meant to imply a neglect of the other elements of poetry, but was rather a loudly-voiced correction of what was regarded as an imbalance in poetry which subordinated sense to sensuality, and meaning to music.

In the latter half of this section I have argued that one can speak about Victorian poetic theory just as one can speak about Romantic poetic theory; that accepting development throughout the era, and recognizing

diversity, one can still discern enough distinct Victorian characteristics and interests to justify the recognition of a coherent poetic outlook. This outlook was directed away from the poem towards the concept of poetry in an attempt to re-establish the relationships between the elements which make up an understanding of poetry. For this reason, poetry was placed in the context of the age, and critical interest centred on establishing the role and function of poetry in a modern age and society such as the Victorians faced.

The reinterpretation or new understanding of poetry which emerged resulted in an emphasis being put upon the content of a poem, on that which gave it a relevance and relationship to the age. The power of poetic synthesis was to be used to reunite the fragmented knowledge of the meaning of life; or the elements of man's being (body and spirit, intellect and emotion); or the relationships of man to man, and man to universe. Nothing is left outside poetry: the poet cannot assume that his audience brings to his poem common religious or philosophical beliefs, instead he draws all into poetry, to create within the poem a centre of belief and order, or as Arnold said, an 'Idea of the world'. Poetry expresses or contains a comprehension of life, and is also, in itself as an art-form, a contribution to the pleasure of life through the harmony and beauty of its arrangement. This is what Carlyle means when he calls poetry 'a musical thought', or what Arnold means when he writes of poetry being 'thought and art in one' ('The Study of Poetry', CPW IX, 163). Both these phrases draw attention to the importance of the idea of unity of expression--although the subject as the thought or matter to be expressed is of prime importance, the meaning or effect is regarded as coming from the poem as a whole.

While Victorian poetic theory must be seen as essentially pragmatic,

as being very much concerned with meaning and effect and orientated towards the audience, it is necessary to note the unique character of this pragmatism, in particular the way in which it is a complex reaction to the age. Victorian poetic theory involves poetry in the great problems of living in the period--religious, social, political, aesthetic. Victorian poetry, therefore, must be judged from a broad perspective, that is, from a definition of poetry which accepts the importance of subject-matter, or more accurately, of content. The poem looks outward to life, rather than inward upon itself as the patterning of words on a page. By seeing Victorian poetry as filled with 'impurities', we fail to recognize an interpretation of poetry which questions the whole notion of 'pure' poetry, of poetry as a palace of art isolated or remote from the problems of real life.

The great problem was that the Victorians found it difficult to reconcile the traditional boundaries and laws of 'the practice of poetry' with their expanded ideas of the concept of poetry. How could poetry 'sing' of subjects which could only be expressed or understood in prosaic language? How could a poem contain ideas and thoughts traditionally belonging to other disciplines? John L. Tupper in 'The Subject in Art, II' (1850), wrote that art 'should be made more directly conversant with the things, incidents, and influences which surround and constitute the living world of those whom Art proposes to improve, and, whether it should appear in event that Art can or can not assume this attitude without jeopardizing her specific existence, that such a consummation were desirable must be equally obvious in either case' (p. 122). It is the means to achieve this 'consummation' of the practice of poetry with the new ideas of poetry as being part of the 'living world' which poets and critics sought to discover. The different views and solutions which this problem engendered form the debate with which this study is concerned, and constitute the themes of the chapters which follow.

C. BROWNING'S 'ESSAY ON SHELLEY'

The imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet.

('Essay on Shelley', p. 68)

Browning's poetry and his poetic theory, and the ways in which they relate to the main ideas about poetry in his own era, form the basis of this entire work. This section, therefore, on Browning's 'Essay on Shelley', like each of the earlier parts of this chapter, is mainly introductory. The 'Essay on Shelley' provides an invaluable insight into Browning's reading of the situation discussed in the previous section. From the 'Essay', and from what he wrote in his letters and poems, I believe it is possible to deduce 1. the way in which Browning regarded the Romantic tradition 2. his assessment of the condition of poetry in his own period, and 3. his ideas about a new poet and a new kind of poetry.

The 'Essay on Shelley' is possibly a very much underrated piece of Victorian poetic theory. The word 'possibly' draws attention to the great problem of the 'Essay'--it is open to several interpretations²⁴ and it is not possible to state with positive assurance which interpretation is correct. As with Browning's other essay, on Tasso and Chatterton (1842), there is a good deal of the special pleading which is such a trait of Browning's poetry. This makes it hard to say exactly how far Browning is expressing his own concept of poetry and how far he is arguing a case. But it is possible to make a few conjectures.

Both essays were written fairly early in Browning's poetic career,

during a period when he was still seeking a direction in poetry and was very much concerned with the problems of poetry and of the poet. The later 'Essay on Shelley' (1852), is by far the more assured and objective of the two works, and gives the impression that Browning is putting forward certain ideas about poetry of importance to his own work. This latter statement can be supported by the fact that Browning often strays far from his subject to present ideas whose presence in the 'Essay' can be explained only by the supposition that they must be of paramount interest to the author. The 'Essay' appears during a period of ferment in Victorian poetics, at the watershed between the rejection of a declining Romantic tradition and fresh interpretations of poetic theory and practice.²⁵ It is not unreasonable, therefore, to believe that in the 'Essay' Browning is stating his own views on poetic history and particularly on the poetic history of his own period. If this reasoning is accepted then it is legitimate to clarify the meaning of the 'Essay' by looking at Browning's own poetry, and views of his poetry which he apparently accepted, and at the condition of poetry at that time, and thus attempt to see the 'Essay' from the perspective in which it was written.

The 'Essay', as I said, is not free from problems of interpretation. Does Browning consider himself to be an objective poet or a poet who combines both subjective and objective qualities? Does Browning regard Shelley as a subjective poet or as a 'whole poet', one who unites the powers of the objective and subjective poet? At what stage in the course of poetic history does Browning believe his period to be? It is helpful to recall that by the time of the 'Essay on Shelley' there was already a body of criticism which at least loosely connected the Romantic poets with subjective poetry.²⁶ In his essay Browning seems to make a

similar identification:

the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the working of his brain. (p. 66)

For such poets the perfection of the landscape is disturbed by the presence of man. This stress on nature, on 'external scenic appearances', implies the poetry of the Romantics. The phrase 'selects that silence of the earth and sea' has echoes of canto clxxviii of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea, and music in its roar:
I love not man the less, but Nature more.

This canto, and the cantos following, received special comment from Browning more than once. In Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (1871), he writes:

'O littleness of man!' deplores the bard;
And then, for fear the Powers should punish him,
'O grandeur of the visible universe
Our human littleness, contrasts withal!
O sun, O moon, ye mountains and thou sea,
Thou emblem of immensity!'
(517-22)²⁷

and in Fifine at the Fair (1872) he again referred to this sea passage in the poem of the 'Childishest childe' (LXVII).

These are examples from later poems, but Browning's view that in

poetry man should be the foreground and nature the background was held right from the start of his poetic career. In Paracelsus (1835), man is seen as the apex of creation:

Thus he dwells in all,
From life's minute beginnings, up at last
To man--the consummation of this scheme
Of being, the completion of this sphere
Of life.

(V, 681-85)

Paracelsus' final insight into 'the secret of the world' is of man's centrality to all creation. It is man who gives life and meaning to nature:

man, once descried, imprints for ever
His presence on all lifeless things: the winds
Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,
A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,
Never a senseless gust now man is born.

(V, 719-23)

Nature is there 'to fill us with regard for man' (V, 738). It is very clear that throughout his life Browning, unlike the Romantics, considered himself to be a poet of 'men and women'. In the 'Epilogue' to Pacchiarotto (1876), he says, 'Man's thoughts and loves and hates! / Earth is my vineyard, these grew there' (xx). He goes on to make yet another assault on Byron and the Romantic 'nature' poets.

Who yearn for the Dark Blue Sea's [yield],
Let them 'lay, pray, bray'--the addle-pates!
Mine be Man's thoughts, loves, hates!

(xx)

In his 'Essay on Shelley' he writes that 'the objective poet, in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men (the result of which dealing, in its pure form, when even description,

as suggesting a describer, is dispensed with, is what we call dramatic poetry)' (p. 66). A superficial reading of these descriptions of subjective and objective poets could lead one to decide that Browning regarded Shelley as a Romantic subjective poet, and himself as an objective poet concerned with 'the doings of men'. But Browning is describing 'opposite tendencies' (p. 66), and is portraying their distinct qualities as sharply as possible.

In the 'Essay' it is unlikely that Browning is presenting himself as an objective poet, that is, as belonging to one of his two defined extremes in poetry. It is to be noted that the objective poet concerns himself with 'the doings of men' (my emphasis), and that this species of poetry 'in its pure form . . . we call dramatic poetry' (my emphasis). In the quotation from the 'Epilogue' to Pacchiarotto Browning made it clear that his subject was 'Man's thoughts, loves, hates'. Browning emphasizes his interest in man's thoughts and feelings rather than in his actions as such. He makes this point even clearer in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873):

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.
(3277-82)

Pure dramatic poetry consists almost entirely of speech and narrated action. In the Preface to the first edition of Paracelsus (1835) Browning insists that his work is 'not a drama', and again he stresses that his interest is in 'the thoughts which give the act significance' and not in the act itself.

[Paracelsus] is an attempt, probably more novel than happy, to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose aim it is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions, by the operation of persons and events; and that, instead of having recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely the mood itself.

He states that his work is not a dramatic poem but something quite novel. 'I do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem', and he goes on to describe the poem as 'an experiment I am in no case likely to repeat'. Most of Browning's works could be regarded as experiments, and, particularly at the start of his career, he seems concerned with the reconciliation of the 'opposite tendencies' described in the 'Essay'.

Pauline (1833) is clearly the most subjective of Browning's poems and the most indebted to the Romantic poets, but even so it is not a pure subjective work. Clyde deL. Ryals in 'Browning's Pauline: the Question of Genre' (1976) argues that Pauline is 'an attempt to assimilate the lyrical and subjective into the dramatic and impersonal. To fail to discern this mixture of modes is to misinterpret the poem' (p. 245). Park Honan, while noting the strong similarity between Pauline and Shelley's Alastor, draws attention to the fact that 'it is just in the incongruities of Pauline that one sees the young Browning and not the young Shelley: a young Browning willing and able to imitate the lyricism of his Romantic predecessors, but consciously or unconsciously disposed to do more with character, to heighten it, above all to dramatize it' (Browning's Characters, p. 17). Pauline is a blend of subjective and objective: the poem is not a subjective confession but the dramatization of one. It is tempting to believe that Browning is playing a part,

analysing a certain kind of poet and poetry. (I shall continue this line of argument in the next chapter.)

Paracelsus also can be seen as an attempt to reconcile subjective and objective tendencies. As the quotation given earlier demonstrates, Browning's aim was to dramatize thought and feeling without allowing external actions and events to dominate the poem. Strafford (1837), which as a stage play could be expected to be wholly objective and dramatic, is again concerned with man's inner life rather than any reproduction of 'things external'. In his preface to the play Browning makes it clear that the interest centres on 'Action in Character, rather than Character in Action'. In his dedication of Sordello to Joseph Millsand in 1863, Browning said that his 'stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so'. Although this dedication was added twenty-three years after the original publication, it is safe to assume that what Browning said in 1863 was also true in 1840.²⁸ The title of his 1842 volume, Dramatic Lyrics, combines the natural form of expression of the objective poet, the dramatic form, with the natural form of the subjective poet, the lyric. These examples of Browning's work all occur well before the 'Essay on Shelley', and show that Browning had attempted to fuse subjective and objective qualities in his poetry previous to the writing of the 'Essay'.

The range of this work, from long narrative-dramatic poems to short lyrics, and the obvious experimentation with form, suggest that Browning was unsure as to the best way of realising the fusion of subjective and objective. The goal has not been attained but the challenge has been accepted. 'Far more rarely it happens that either [the subjective or objective faculty] is found so decidedly prominent and superior, as to be pronounced comparatively pure: while of the perfect shield, with

the gold and the silver side set up for all comers to challenge, there has yet been no instance' ('Essay', p. 67). It is almost impossible to believe, considering Browning's philosophy,²⁹ that he could acknowledge an ideal and not strive towards it.

Part of the difficulty of interpreting the 'Essay' is caused by the question of how we are to read Browning's evaluation of subjective, objective, and subjective-objective qualities. Which does he consider the highest form of poetry? The difficulty becomes acute when one remembers that Shakespeare is presented to us as the highest example of an objective poet, while Shelley is called the 'whole poet'. Does this mean that Browning considers Shakespeare to be inferior to the 'whole poet' Shelley? Also does Browning regard subjective poetry as greater than objective poetry? Some of these problems may be resolved by a close reading of the text.

In the 'Essay' Browning writes that 'these two modes of poetic faculty may . . . issue hereafter from the same poet in successive perfect works' (my emphasis, p. 67). But the 'perfect shield [i.e. the single poem], with the gold and the silver side [the subjective and objective elements combined in one work of art]' has as yet never been formed. The 'perfect' poem would seem to be the simultaneous presentation of the two modes of poetry,³⁰ as opposed to 'successive perfect works' in each of the modes. I appreciate that Browning uses 'perfect' for both the separate and the united expressions of subjective and objective poetry, but it would seem that Browning uses 'perfect' in the 'successive'-quotation to mean works which are perfect examples of either the objective or subjective poetic faculty. In the second quotation, however, he uses 'shield' as a metaphor for 'poem' so that 'perfect' here means a perfection applicable to all poems, and in effect then Browning is

describing his idea of the perfect poem. This kind of perfection, Browning is careful to say, has never been achieved and it is significant that Browning does not call Shelley, or any other poet for that matter, a 'perfect poet'. In Sordello he writes:

'Search your fill;
You get no whole and perfect Poet--still
New Ninas, Alcamos, till time's mid-night
Shrouds all'.

(V, 115-18)³¹

In Paracelsus 'God is the perfect poet' (II, 648). In Sordello, as in the 'Essay', there is an endless cycle of poetry, a striving towards perfection. In Paracelsus the ideal, the perfection, is God's, and therefore it is clear that Browning could not have intended in the 'Essay' to suggest that any poet had achieved the creation of the perfect poem. However his use of the word 'yet' signifies that for Browning the challenge must be accepted and the attempt must be made, even if the goal is unattainable in this world.

To return to the questions asked earlier--if it is accepted that Browning did not see Shelley as a 'perfect poet', what does he mean by the term 'whole poet', and how are we to read Browning's evaluation of the subjective and objective poetic faculties? First, Browning makes it clear that the subjective and objective faculties are of equal status: 'it would be idle to inquire, of these two kinds of poetic faculty in operation, which is the higher or even rarer endowment' (p. 67). From this it is clear that the rare purely subjective or objective poet, and the more common poet who has within him aspects of both poetic faculties, have all the same value. Shakespeare and Shelley are not given as examples of a lesser and greater poet, but as equally great poets in their different kinds of poetry.

A more difficult question is what Browning means by a 'whole poet'. Browning's views on the subjective and objective poetic faculties in no way imply that he regarded either as producing incomplete poetry, and in fact Browning's use of the term 'whole poet' has no direct reference to either poetic faculty. In other words, 'whole poet' does not mean a poet who combines both faculties, either perfectly or imperfectly. The 'whole poet' is one who fulfils the 'function of beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection' (p. 71). This comes after the section in which Browning discusses false poetry. 'All the bad poetry in the world . . . will be found to result from some one of the infinite degrees of discrepancy between the attributes of the poet's soul, occasioning a want of correspondency between his work and the verities of nature,--issuing in poetry, false under whatever form, which shows a thing not as it is to mankind generally, nor as it is to the particular describer, but as it is supposed to be for some unreal neutral mood, midway between both and of value to neither' (pp. 69-70).

Several points are of interest here. The remarks on false poetry very clearly include both subjective and objective faculties ('which shows a thing not as it is to mankind generally'--objective poetry; 'nor as it is to the particular describer'--subjective poetry). His concluding phrase, although not very clear, suggests a poet who has only half attained the proper poetic vision: his vision is incomplete and he is not a 'whole poet' in either poetic faculty ('midway between both and of value to neither'). The crucial failing is that the poetry does not correspond to reality ('a want of correspondency between his work and the verities of nature'). Shelley is presented as an example of the 'whole poet', one who fulfils the proper function of poetry by

virtue of his complete poetic vision. Why Browning uses Shelley to illustrate this, and why he introduces this section on fidelity to reality at this particular stage in the argument will be discussed later.

It is important to determine how Browning regarded himself in subjective and objective terms if we are to establish his relation to the Romantics and to his contemporaries. I have argued that Browning attempted to combine both modes in his poetry, but it is possible to challenge this interpretation of his poetry by seeing the examples given earlier as Browning's efforts to free himself from the Romantic influence and to evolve an objective dramatic poetry.³² This view makes Browning an objective poet. Because of the importance of this matter to the thesis as a whole, it is necessary to place my interpretation on as firm a basis as possible. For this purpose the letters of E.B.B. are particularly valuable. Her judgment of Browning's poetry is at times extremely penetrating. Also Browning seems either to have made some of her views his own or to have held very similar views, certainly there are instances when he echoes her thoughts as expressed in the letters. Thomas J. Collins in Robert Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory, 1833-1855 goes so far as to suggest that E.B.B. should be given 'more credit for the maturation of Browning's aesthetic theory than has hitherto been acknowledged' (p. 119). At any rate her assessment of Browning's poetry is seldom far from his own.

In her letter of 15 January 1845, E.B.B. writes: 'You have in your vision two worlds--or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective & objective in the habits of your mind' (Kintner I, 9). Another letter, dated 16 August 1845, expresses particular admiration for Browning's balance. She writes that it is 'quite startling & humiliating,

to observe how you combine such large tracts of experience of outer & inner life, of books & men, of the world & the arts of it; curious knowledge as well as general knowledge . . . & deep thinking as well as wide acquisition, . . . & you, looking none the older for it all!' (my emphasis, I, 163).

Perhaps the most important letter of E.B.B.'s on this aspect of Browning's poetry is that of 17 February 1845. In this early letter in her correspondence with Browning she singles out the characteristic of his work which she most admires--his 'great range'. The most significant factor is that she does not merely say that Browning can write objectively and subjectively in successive works, but that he can harmonize and combine these two poetic faculties in individual poems, as for example in Pippa Passes. Her sensitivity to Browning's work makes her realize that this is his aim, something which he will attempt more and more.

She writes:

You have taken a great range--from those high faint notes of the mystics which are beyond personality . . . to dramatic impersonations . . . and when those are thrown into harmony, as in a manner they are in 'Pippa Passes' . . . the combinations of effect must always be striking & noble--and you must feel yourself drawn to such combinations more and more. (I, 22)

Joseph Milsand's two long reviews of Browning are also of great value--like E.B.B.'s, his judgments on Browning's poetry are sharp and perceptive. Milsand became a close friend of Browning and, what is of more importance, Browning evidently greatly valued his critical opinion. Philip Drew notes that 'after his wife's death Browning sent copies of his poems to Milsand before they went to the printers, and Milsand, with some regularity it appears, would read them and make suggestions for their improvement' (Poetry of Browning, p. 376). It is likely then that

Browning approved Milsand's opinions of his work, and we may take it that what Milsand wrote in 1851 and 1856 came close to an accurate assessment of Browning's aims and intentions.

Although in the later review Milsand makes use of Browning's 'Essay on Shelley', this does not detract from the originality of his thinking or from the fact that he, like E.B.B. many years earlier, believes that Browning simultaneously blends subjective and objective faculties, lyric and dramatic forms. In the review of 1856 he writes:

M. Browning ne dit rien de plus; mais cela seul nous laisse assez voir qu'il sympathise également avec les deux inspirations, et je serais porté à croire que, dès le principe, et en partie à son insu, le travail constant de son esprit n'a été qu'un effort pour les concilier et les fondre en une seule, pour trouver moyen d'être, non pas tour à tour, mais simultanément, lyrique et dramatique, subjectif et pittoresque.
(p. 546)

In fact Milsand had made similar comments on Browning's harmonizing of opposite tendencies in an article which appeared before the 'Essay', and of which Browning clearly approved.³³ In this article of 1851 he says:

Ce qu'il rapporte tout d'abord, c'est une combinaison à doses plus égales de ses deux caractères précédents, disons de ses deux matières. Les limites qui séparent le réel du spirituel, ce qu'on perçoit avec les sens de ce qu'on perçoit par l'esprit, sont à peu près effacées. Il passe brusquement d'une image microscopique à une abstraction, d'un trait extérieur de ce monde à un de ses nerfs invisibles, du sérieux au comique.
(p. 683)

While it is important to understand how Browning regarded himself in terms of subjective and objective in order to assess how he saw his position in relation to his Romantic predecessors and to his contemporaries, the terms in themselves are not important. Milsand's early review is helpful in focusing attention on the central point of Browning's art

(and of Browning's 'Essay') without the distraction of having to worry over the terms subjective and objective. This central point is, I believe, the combining of opposite effects in poetry. Milsand, in fact, expresses this aspect of Browning's art much more precisely, and much more clearly, than Browning himself.³⁴ If one examines this passage from Milsand's review of 1851 one can see how accurately it describes Browning's poetry and Browning's own ideas about poetry. Milsand correctly recognizes that Browning is rejecting outworn traditions and is moving forward towards a new development in poetry, a development which meets the needs of the age.

In The Ring and the Book Browning writes, 'I fused my live soul and that inert stuff' (I, 469), and "'Yet by a special gift, an art of arts, / More insight and more oversight and much more / Will to use both of these than boast my mates"' (I, 746-48), he animates his subject. Here Browning indicates the very heart of his art as being a fusion of subject and object ('fused my live soul and that inert stuff', 'more insight and more oversight'). Browning stresses the point that in this fusion he is ahead of his contemporaries. In Aristophanes' Apology (1875) Milsand's remarkable insights into Browning's aims become even clearer. In this poem Browning again considers a new kind of poetry which combines two different forms of the art, in this case tragedy and comedy. Aristophanes says:

You know what kind's the nobler, what makes grave
Or what makes grin; there's yet a nobler still,
Possibly,--what makes wise, not grave,--and glad,
Not grinning: whereby laughter joins with tears,
Tragic and Comic Poet prove one power,
And Aristophanes becomes our Fourth--
Nay, greatest! Never needs the Art stand still.
(1298-1304)

He calls such a mixture

complex Poetry,
Uniting each god-grace, including both:
Which, operant for body as for soul,
Masters alike the laughter and the tears,
Supreme in lowliest earth, sublimest sky.
Who dares disjoin these, whether he ignores
Body or soul, whichever half destroys,--
Maims the else perfect manhood.

(1473-80)

Aristophanes' ideal 'complex poetry' (as yet unattained), which seeks to unite body and soul, and earth and sky, is very like Browning's 'perfect shield', the perfect blend of the subjective and objective poet who writes for 'the many below' and 'the One above' ('Essay', p. 65). Aristophanes' 'complex poetry' is, however, even more like Milsand's description of Browning's own poetry--a combining and harmonizing of sense and soul, the realistic and the spiritual, the serious and the comic.

And so, re-ordinating outworn rule,
Made Comedy and Tragedy combine,
Prove some new Both-yet-neither, all one bard,
Euripides with Aristophanes
Cooperant!

(Aristophanes' Apology, 3439-43)

These lines are of particular interest because they indicate Browning's attitude to his art: for the development of poetry (cf. 'Never needs the Art stand still'), it is necessary to revise, re-order, and reinterpret the rules and conventions of art. As early as Paracelsus (1835) he quite clearly expressed this attitude: 'I do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem, wherein all those restrictions only submitted to on account of compensating good in the original scheme are scrupulously retained, as though for some special fitness in themselves'

(Preface). Not surprisingly Browning often identified himself with the innovators in the arts. For example in 'Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper' (1876) he compares himself to Beethoven and Schumann:

'tis proven
I break rule as bad as Beethoven.
'That chord now--a groan or a grunt is't?
Schumann's self was no worse contrapuntist'
(xxvi)

He particularly compares himself to Euripides,³⁵ the 'new' poet of classical Greece, who as DeVane says brought 'new elements . . . to the Greek drama . . . which made him distasteful to the conservatives of his day' (Handbook, p. 351). This identification is obviously very significant since Euripides is the poet who initiates a new development in his art and brings it into the stream of the life of his times (an age, as Browning shows in the Balaustion poems, of change and upheaval, not unlike his own era). With this background of how Browning saw his poetry, and how his poetry was regarded by those who best understood his aims, it is now possible to return to the 'Essay on Shelley' and attempt to answer the questions set earlier.

Why did Browning use Shelley to illustrate the qualities of the 'whole poet', and why did he introduce the idea of the 'whole poet' at that particular stage of his discussion? As I argued at the beginning of this section, I believe that the 'Essay' is an important contribution to Victorian poetic theory. In my view Browning identifies himself with Shelley,³⁶ just as he later identifies himself with Euripides, and uses him to express his own poetic aims. He also uses what seems to be a general discussion on different poetic faculties to set his age in the context of the history of the development of poetry.

In the 'Essay' Browning describes what happens in the course of poetic history after a period of subjective poetry:

A tribe of successors (Homerides) working more or less in the same spirit, dwell on his [a great subjective poet's] discoveries and reinforce his doctrine; till, at unawares, the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest. Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe . . . prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight, shaping for their uses a new and different creation from the last, which it displaces by the right of life over death. (p. 68)

As I said earlier, Browning identifies the subjective poets with the Romantics. In this passage he seems to regard his own period as one which is subsisting on 'the straw of last year's harvest'. I prefer this interpretation to one which sees Browning's period as that of the 'tribe of successors' because Browning puts by far the greater emphasis on the dying stages of the subjective tradition,³⁷ and uses a stronger more emotive language to reinforce 'the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet'. His main point is that the subjective tradition has become out of touch with reality, and to restore this bond with reality, 'the fresh and living swathe', the new poet must be more objective, 'prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight'.

This cycle of subjective and objective poetry is, as Browning says, 'the inevitable process' (p. 68). But the mainspring of this process is not this pendular or circular motion of subjective and objective (a movement in which development is questionable), but the essential bond of poetry to truth and reality. Thus as mankind develops poetry develops.

This is the key to Browning's view of Shelley. 'Gradually he was learning that the best way of removing abuses is to stand fast by truth' (p. 78).

In the 'Essay' Browning's admiration for Shelley is based on a belief in Shelley's potential, in the possibilities of his growth and development into the kind of poet Browning himself was trying to become. Browning regards Shelley as beginning the process of development he himself intends to continue. Notice in the quotation which concludes the preceding paragraph Browning uses the word 'gradually'. He then goes on to speak of 'the preliminary step to following Christ, is the leaving the dead to bury their dead' (my emphasis, p. 78). This bears a strong resemblance to E.B.B.'s letter of 20 March 1845 where she argues that Art must advance to new forms and new thoughts: 'Let us all aspire rather to Life--& let the dead bury their dead' (Kintner I, 43). Browning seems to see Shelley as moving away from Romantic subjectivity towards a new balanced poetry³⁸--the 'simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete' (p. 82). 'I would rather consider Shelley's poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal' (my emphasis, p. 82).

Browning's interest is clearly in the combination, the fusion, of different poetic ideals. But Shelley's work is not perfect. Browning notes 'successful instances of objectivity in Shelley' (p. 82) which suggests that, from what there actually is of Shelley's work, one would tend to regard Shelley as a subjective poet. Browning makes it very clear that Shelley had only made a 'fragmentary essay' toward the ideal. Yet Shelley is also used as an example of the 'whole poet'. Milsand

recognized that Browning was writing a poetry of his times, and Browning himself, particularly in his identification of himself with Euripides, the new poet of the new age, recognized the importance of the relation of poetry to reality, the life of the times.

In the 'Essay' the sequence of thought moves from the stagnation of the subjective tradition existing on 'the shadow of a reality' and then the call for another sort of poet, to a discussion of 'all the bad poetry in the world' which Browning describes as that which fails to correspond to 'the verities of nature'. In effect the chain of thought is unbroken: Browning is describing a poetry which is not true to reality, 'false under whatever form'. Shelley, the poet who was moving away from the outworn subjective Romantic tradition, is also the 'whole poet' who sees 'nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection' (my emphasis). In the poetic situation of his time Browning is emphasizing the lack of correspondence between poetry and the life of the age in which it is written. Shelley is used to suggest the direction which poetry ought to take, as well as to suggest the qualities necessary for all true poetry, qualities which Browning feels his contemporaries lack.

The ostensible subject of the dissertation, Shelley, and the difficulties caused by the use of the terms subjective and objective, blur the importance of the 'Essay' as a piece of Victorian poetic theory and as an expression of Browning's own ideas about poetry. If my reading of the 'Essay' is correct then it is a remarkably clear-sighted assessment of the poetic situation of his day. The relation of the 'Essay' to what was discussed in the previous section is clear. Browning points out the inadequacy of the Romantic tradition and stresses the necessity of a fresh interpretation of life, which in turn necessitates a fresh

interpretation of poetry---a new kind of poetic vision and a new kind of poetry. The period of poetic history in which his age occurs demands that this new kind of poetry be more objective in order to restore the bond of poetry with reality.

Nevertheless, Browning does not regard himself as a pure objective poet. His aim, which in the 'Essay' becomes Shelley's partial achievement, is to express the correspondency of 'the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal' (p. 82). This is very like Milsand's view of Browning's art, and is, as Milsand recognized, a new development, a break with tradition. Browning's ideal poetry is that which can communicate a visionary insight into the absolute through, or within, an expression 'of objects for men's outer and not inner sight', of 'perfection in imperfection'.

What Browning means in the 'Essay' comes more sharply into focus when it is related to his other writings. In his letter to Ruskin of 10 December 1855 he describes 'all poetry [as] being a putting the infinite within the finite' with 'more ultimates' and 'less mediates' than prose. What is implied here is a complete and revolutionary poetic theory. The implication is that the poet's vision into the absolute and the spiritual should be rendered through subjects which are realistic in that they reflect the imperfections of nature and man. But the most interesting factor of this poetic theory is that Browning does not stop at a consideration of subject-matter but goes on to discuss the manner of expression. In both the 'Essay' and the letter to Ruskin, Browning suggests a form of expression reminiscent of impressionism. The poet's vision, his insight into 'the ultimates', is communicated to the reader through the co-operation of the reader's imagination. This aspect of Browning's poetic theory, and the importance of the letter to Ruskin,

will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

After a close study of the 'Essay' one is struck by its unique character as a work of Victorian poetic theory. Unlike most Victorian criticism, the 'Essay' contains no specific analysis of the Victorian age. Browning discusses poetry not in the context of any particular age, but in terms of cycles of differing modes of poetic creativity. While the Victorian critic generally asks what kind of subjects best meet the needs of the age, Browning asks what must be the character of the poetry at this point in poetic history to carry on the natural process of poetic development. Both questions assume the need for a new kind of poetry, but by taking a view which rises above the age, Browning is able to concentrate more exclusively and more clearly on the problems and nature of poetic development.

Moreover he concentrates on the central problem of Victorian poetics: the seemingly unbridgable gap between subject and object. His theory strides step by step with the problems of his times. Most important of all is the fact that he seeks no superficial bridge between poetry and reality: subject-matter is not the main issue of the 'Essay'. The 'Essay' centres on the poet's vision, and his ability to express his vision. Subject-matter plays an important part in these concerns but it is clearly part of an entire theory, an entire re-interpretation of poetry.

I have already quoted a small part of E.B.B.'s letter of 20 March 1845 in connection with the 'Essay', but the whole section on the future direction of poetry is of importance to Browning's poetic theory. Here my concern is with E.B.B.'s firm conviction that 'we want new forms . . . as well as thoughts', and also in her view that 'there is poetry everywhere . . . the "treasure" (see the old fable) lies all over the

field' (Kintner I, 43). In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country Browning speaks of 'a beauty buried everywhere. / If we have souls, know how to see and use' (57-58). He goes on to say:

Earth's ugliest walled and ceiled imprisonment
 May suffer, through its single rent in roof,
Admittance of a cataract of light
 Beyond attainment through earth's palace-panes
 Pinholed athwart their windowed filagree
 By twinklings sobered from the sun outside.
 (my emphasis, 65-70)

In the 'Essay' Browning writes that, 'Gradually [Shelley] was raised above the contemplation of spots and the attempt at effacing them, to the great Abstract Light, and, through the discrepancy of the creation, to the sufficiency of the First Cause' (my emphasis, p. 78). The points which are of interest here are, first, that an unattractive or common subject can be used to better effect than a conventionally beautiful or noble subject to reveal the highest truths, and secondly, that this new approach to subject-matter demands 'new forms'. It is evident that Browning's interest in unconventional and unusual subjects is part of an entire poetic theory demanding innovation in every aspect of his art. It is this organic view of poetry which I shall study in the next chapter on Browning's poetic theory.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ Max Beerbohm, Rossetti and His Circle, cartoon 4. The drawings were executed during 1916-1917.

² In The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris, pp. 36-53 (p. 39).

³ 'The Study of Architecture' (1865), in On the Old Road: a Collection of Miscellaneous Essays and Articles, 1871-1888, Works XIX, 24.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', Works XXVII, 81, 63.

⁵ The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, p. 99. Hereafter referred to as Letters to Clough. See my Ch III for a more detailed treatment of what is meant by the 'unpoetical age'.

⁶ The ideas of progress and civilisation formed the basis of national pride and unity. But even here there was doubt. Tennyson, regarded then and now as the poet of his age, is frequently misrepresented as a smug singer of Victorian virtues. Although the extremely strong criticism of 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After' may be exceptional, he seldom gives unqualified praise to his civilisation. Most often he neatly side-steps the problem by praising British manhood, while allowing the flaws in Victorian society to dissolve into a hope that things may improve.

Dickens' opening of A Tale of Two Cities, 'The Period', captures the general sense of ambiguity: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . in short, the period was so far like the present period'.

It is this ambiguity, inherent in the age itself, which makes it so difficult for present day historians and literary critics to make sense out of what appears to be confusion. It is perfectly possible to regard the Victorians as optimists or pessimists, depending on which Victorian you choose to listen to and on which occasion he is speaking.

⁷ Kristian Smidt in 'The Intellectual Quest of the Victorian Poets' (1959), argues convincingly that the Victorian poets were primarily concerned with knowledge. She writes:

So the poets were left with the intellectual task, much more exacting perhaps than any that Shelley tackled, of writing poetry while trying to piece together a belief and a world view that should take adequate account of the assertions of scientists and positivists. They could no longer liberate their minds in revolutionary ardour, but were pressed to argue their beliefs and disbeliefs.

(p. 95)

Once again it is worth stressing that the Romantic and Victorian poets did not face the same challenges or share the same aims.

⁸ See Arnold's conclusion to 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'.

9 'Review of some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold', pp. 356-57. Clough's views are echoed by Henry H. Lancaster in 1864 in his review of Tennyson's Enoch Arden. Lancaster writes:

There was in these first efforts no attempt to portray life; no study of the motives and interests of life, or of the sources of action; no story, little real emotion. There is not even distinct representation of nature. There is sweetness of music, and painting rich in colour; but the tones are like the murmur of a brook, speaking of many things, yet of nothing clearly; and the lines are confused with the mirage of unreality which hangs over the whole. (p. 231)

Lancaster is describing Tennyson's early poetry, of the mature Tennyson he writes:

A poet may use unaccustomed forms, he may choose new themes, may illustrate strange aspects of life; but if he is to be a poet at all he must reach the hearts of his readers, and to do this he must be the poet of his own age. (p. 232)

10 This is the title of Ch vii of The Gay Science, vol I. Dallas' thoughts are very close to Arnold's in such poems as 'The Buried Life' and 'Dover Beach'. There is even a resemblance in the language and phrases used. 'We have within us a hidden life' (p. 199). 'Outside consciousness there rolls a vast tide of life, which is, perhaps, even more important to us than the little isle of our thoughts which lies within our ken' (p. 207).

11 In The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris, pp. 74-93 (p. 93).

12 The sentence in which this phrase occurs lists some of the different 'schools' of poetic disposition: 'Those different powers of poetic disposition, the energies of Sensitive, of Reflective, of Passionate Emotion, which in former times were intermingled and derived from mutual support an extensive empire over the feelings of men, were now restrained within separate spheres of agency' (p. 620). Hallam observes a tendency for poets and for poetry to be divided into different 'schools'. The observation of this tendency is extremely common in Victorian criticism, but Hallam is almost unique in actually seeing this as a sign of the times, another example of fragmentation and alienation.

13 This is very like Arnold's Preface of 1853. 'The cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced' (CPW I, 1). Both Hallam and Arnold are criticizing aspects of Romantic poetry.

14 Hallam may have in mind Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1801):

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at

present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensations into the midst of the objects of the science itself.

(Works, p. 738b)

Wordsworth did not see that science, while indeed bringing about a 'material revolution' and advancing the physical standards of life, would, at the same time, produce a spiritual revolution and 'decrease [man's] subjective power' (Hallam). Hallam's point is that the issue is not whether the poet can assimilate the subjects of science into his art, but whether the poet's audience will want to, or be able to, experience 'sensations [carried] into the midst of the objects of science itself'.

¹⁵ Biographia Literaria, pp. 217-18 (Ch xviii). Coleridge is criticizing Wordsworth by arguing that 'the thoughts, feelings, language and manners of the shepherd-farmers . . . as far as they are actually adopted in those poems, may be accounted for from causes which will and do produce the same results in every state of life, whether in town or country' (p. 190, Ch xxvii). Wordsworth's language is not confined to rustic life but is in fact in much more general use. This language is what Coleridge calls 'the best part of human language':

The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflections on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed or reaped.

(p. 197, Ch xxvii)

In the Victorian era this 'best part of human language' was no longer in everyday use. The two main factors in the formation of this language were in decline--religion and the subjective power of man (the influence of 'religious instructors and other superiors' and the 'voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination'). The ordinary language of the Victorians dealt with the surface of life, with the material practical aspects of living. Poetry, a deep and elevating thing (as Bagehot called it), going beyond the material and superficial, seemed written in an unfamiliar artificial language.

¹⁶ E.g. Arnold notes that 'disinterested objectivity [has] disappeared; the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced'. In his conclusion he particularly stresses the danger of 'caprice' in the composition of poetry. For the context of Arnold's criticisms see the two works by Sidney Coulling listed in the Bibliography.

¹⁷ What I mean by 'balance' is perhaps best expressed by the passage from Wordsworth's Preface to The Excursion quoted earlier, in which he observes how the 'external World' is fitted to the 'individual Mind' and how both 'with blended might' accomplish 'the creation'. Coleridge similarly writes of images 'modified by a predominant passion' (my emphasis). The aim is to animate the universe and its objects: 'a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit' (Biographia Literaria, p. 177, Ch xv). The Romantics sought to unite man to his universe. The poet looks outward, as well as inward, his spirit is 'transferred' to the external world. The early Victorians could not maintain this balance, this outward direction of mind, since their objective world was regarded as unpoetical. In the Preface Arnold attacks the view that 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry'. (This view was expressed particularly by David Masson in 'Theories of Poetry and a New Poet' in 1853, and it was to this article that Arnold was reacting.) In this theory of poetry the poet looks inward to 'the state of [his] own mind': the narrowing of the Romantic idea of the mind in a balanced act of creation is clear.

¹⁸ Modern Painters V, Pt ix, Ch 12, § 5 and § 6. Works VII, 448. It is interesting to notice that Ruskin's modern political economist sounds remarkably like Browning's Guido in his second monologue and in the Pope's assessment of him in Book X:

'I live for greed, ambition, lust, revenge;
Attain these ends by force, guile: hypocrite,
To-day, perchance to-morrow recognized
The rational man, the type of common sense.'
(1937-40)

Ruskin's contrast of human values as mere 'poetical phrases' with 'reality' and 'truth', is similar to Browning's major theme in The Ring and the Book of poetry's relation to reality and truth.

'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?'
(I, 455-56)

Part of my argument in Chapter Four will be that The Ring and the Book, despite its seventeenth century Italian setting, is very much concerned with Victorian controversies and debates, and is very much of the Victorian 'current of ideas'.

¹⁹ Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 210.

²⁰ E.g. in his 'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocöon', Arnold presents poetry as the epitome of other art-forms: the poet, 'so much he has to do! / Be painter and musician too!' Ruskin vaguely defines poetry as '"the suggestion, by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions"' (Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 1, § 13, 14. Works V, 28). Hence, 'a great poet would then be a term strictly, and in precisely the same sense, applicable to both ['a great painter' and 'a great versifier'], if warranted by the character of the images or thoughts which each in their respective languages conveyed' (Modern Painters I, Pt i, Sec I, Ch 2, § 3. Works III, 88). J. S. Mill, in 'What is Poetry?' writes that poetry 'may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse, [and in] something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through

those other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones, which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture' (p. 60).

²¹ Biographia Literaria, pp. 173-74 (Ch xiv). It should be noted that Coleridge shifts the definition of poetry and its powers of synthesis towards a consideration of the process of creation in the poet's mind. The Victorians were more concerned with the relation of poetry to the audience and to the external universe. They were much less concerned with the process than with the result. The difference between the expressive Romantic theory and the pragmatic Victorian theory is clear in this altered view of the 'synthetic and magical power' of poetry.

²² Cf. this analogy to evolution with what Carlyle writes:

Thus the History of a nation's Poetry is the essence of its History, political, economic, scientific, religious. With all these the complete Historian of a national Poetry will be familiar; the national physiognomy, in its finest traits, and through its successive stages of growth, will be clear to him: he will discern the grand spiritual Tendency of each period, what was the highest Aim and Enthusiasm of mankind in each, and how one epoch naturally evolved itself from the other. (my emphasis)

('Historic Survey of German Poetry', 1831.

Works XXVII, 341-42)

²³ Shakespeare, with Introductory Matter on Poetry, the Drama, and the Stage, in The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge II, 66.

²⁴ E.g. two carefully argued opposing positions can be found in Thomas J. Collins' Robert Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory, 1833-1855, and Philip Drew's Poetry of Browning.

²⁵ Joseph Milsand in a remarkably perceptive article of 1856, 'La Poésie Expressive et Dramatique en Angleterre: M. Robert Browning', recognizes just this fact. In particular he notes the turning away from Wordsworthian Romanticism towards a more objective and intellectual poetry:

Est-ce à dire qu'en somme la poésie se soit rapprochée de ce qu'elle était au commencement du siècle? Tant s'en faut. Ce qui me frappe, au contraire, c'est que, depuis une vingtaine d'années, elle s'engage décidément dans une voie nouvelle, dans une voie du moins où elle n'avait jamais marché avec une détermination aussi arrêtée, et qui, en définitive, la conduit presque à l'antipode de Wordsworth et de son école. Après tout, Wordsworth était un poète intime, et bien qu'il n'eût rien du docteur qui veut enseigner, il aspirait à exercer une influence, à propager et à faire aimer ce qu'il aimait lui-même comme les belles façons d'être homme. Maintenant, la poésie qui

s'écrit et tente de s'écrire, est à la fois plus intellectuelle et plus objective; elle est avide de peindre, de représenter corporellement les idées qu'on peut se faire de ce qui existe ou de ce qui est beau et bien; elle tend à éclairer en aidant l'esprit à se figurer les choses réelles ou concevables.

(p. 516)

Later he goes on to recognize Browning as a representative of this new departure:

C'est à l'un des plus remarquables représentants de cette phase nouvelle que je voudrais m'arrêter, à M. Browning.

(p. 518)

Milsand firmly places Browning in the development of poetry in his age. This is exactly the point which I have been emphasizing--that Browning must be seen as a leading figure in the significant poetic developments of the Victorian period. He should not be regarded as an anomaly; as someone independent of his age.

26 See Abrams, Mirror and the Lamp, pp. 143-44, and Ch 9, especially Pt 3, 'Subjective and Objective in English Theory'. See also R. G. Cox, 'The Victorian Criticism of Poetry: The Minority Tradition' (1951). Although Cox does not discuss the terms subjective and objective, the discussions of poetry in the critical works he examines can be readily identified with what Browning terms subjective, objective, 'bad' or 'false' poetry. The 'Essay on Shelley' clearly belongs to this 'minority tradition', even though Browning's assessment of the poetic situation is exceptional in its disinterestedness, its apparent detachment from the contemporary situation.

27 Cf. these lines to what Browning writes in Sordello:

The thought of Eglamor's least like a thought,
And yet a false one, was, 'Man shrinks to naught
If matched with symbols of immensity;
Must quail, forsooth, before a quiet sky
Or sea.'

(VI, 1-5)

Eglamor's poetry is clearly identified with Romantic poetry which Browning criticizes here for the weakness of its thought (which was a major criticism against the Romantics in the 1850s, see the article by R. G. Cox). Browning also criticizes this kind of poetry because it wrongly exalts nature over man.

28 It is arguable that the remarks in the dedication were an afterthought, reflecting Browning's views in 1863 and not necessarily those of 1840, when he seems still to have been searching for a direction in poetry. This argument could be supported by the fact that 'four different Sordellos were written' (DeVane, Handbook, p. 72), one of which, the second, is taken by DeVane to have been 'of passion and war' (p. 77), and not unlike the work of Scott. If this were true then the 'development of a soul' may not always have been the main interest of Sordello. But DeVane assumes that what Browning said in his

1863 dedication was 'his original intention in the poem' (p. 73) and this is surely the sanest view to take. There is little evidence that Browning ever felt that anything other than the development of a soul was worthy of study, and the works surrounding Sordello--Pauline, Paracelsus, Strafford, and Pippa Passes --show that this interest was as strongly developed in Browning's early years as in 1863.

29 By 'Browning's philosophy' I mean those beliefs and views on the meaning and conduct of life which appear throughout his poetry, and which he himself seems to have sanctioned. In this particular case I refer to Browning's belief in the need to strive. Some examples are: 'Andrea del Sarto', 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,/Or what's a Heaven for?'; the Pope in The Ring and the Book, 'This I refer still to the foremost fact,/Life is probation and the earth no goal/But starting-point of man: compel him strive,/Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal' (X, 1434-37); 'Prospice'; 'Reverie'; and the Epilogue to Asolando.

30 This is clearly not the same as 'a mere running in of the one faculty upon the other,[as] is, of course, the ordinary circumstance' (p. 67).

31 Cf. Carlyle, 'At bottom, clearly enough, there is no perfect Poet!' (On Heroes, Works V, 82). It is known that Browning included some of Carlyle's ideas in his 'Essay on Shelley' (see Letters of Robert Browning, p. 36), and that he attended the 'Heroes' lectures on the 5th, 8th, and 12th of May 1840 (see New Letters of Robert Browning, p. 19, footnote 8). There are traces of Carlyle's thought in the 'Essay'. In 'The Death of Goethe' Carlyle calls 'the true Poet . . . the Seer' (Works XXVII, 377), and in On Heroes Carlyle again stresses the 'seeing eye' of the poet (Works V, 105). Browning's example of the greatest of the objective poets is Shakespeare. In On Heroes Carlyle presents Shakespeare as the 'chief of all Poets' (p. 103). Carlyle also says that a 'System of Thought' grows 'till its full stature is reached, and such System of Thought can grow no further, but must give place to another' (pp. 21-22). This is obviously akin to Browning's cycles of poetry. Ruskin in Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 1, § 13, 14 (Works V, 29), in his definition of poetry, calls the poet a "'Maker'", one who assembles 'images as will excite these [noble emotions]' in the reader. There is a germ here of Browning's objective poet who writes for 'the many below' (p. 65). My main point is that Browning obviously took an interest in contemporary theories of poetry, but his thinking is strikingly original. The examples of possible borrowings noted above only emphasize this originality since Browning evidently made these ideas his own, giving them meanings not to be found in his sources.

32 For this view see Drew, Poetry of Browning, especially Chapters 1-3.

33 See letter to Edward Chapman, 16 January 1852 (New Letters, pp. 53-54). For a fuller account of the relationship between Browning and Milsand, as well as a discussion of Milsand's articles on Browning, see Drew, Poetry of Browning, pp. 375-82. Drew

rightly argues against DeVane's view that Browning amplified Milsand's theory of poetry as expressed in the 1851 review (Handbook, p. 579), but it is perhaps too strong to say that 'Milsand's article bears almost no relation to the Essay and cannot have been a source for it' (Poetry of Browning, p. 5).

From the letter to Chapman referred to earlier, it is evident that Milsand's article was very much in Browning's thoughts at the time of the composition of the 'Essay'. Also Browning's use of sources invariably leaves no more than a tenuous link to the original (cf. the influence of Carlyle, which Browning even acknowledges, on the 'Essay'). Milsand's view of Browning's poetry in the 1851 review supports E.B.B.'s view in her letters and possibly contributed to Browning's scheme of two opposite modes of poetry and to the idea of a perfect combination of both.

Where Milsand's essay may most have entered Browning's thought is in his connection of a new kind of poetry to the condition and needs of the age--Browning's 'imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet'. It is also significant that, again like E.B.B., Milsand recognizes Browning's great potential, but does not feel that he has as yet reached his fullest powers. Browning, in the 'Essay', presents the 'perfect shield' as something still to be attained.

34 It should be remembered, however, that Browning was supposed to be writing about Shelley and therefore his own opinions are, to some extent, disguised in terms which are more popular and general than precisely descriptive of his own views. Browning does make it clear that he is using terms which are current at the time--'an objective poet, as the phrase now goes' (my emphasis, p. 63), and 'the subjective poet of modern classification' (my emphasis, p. 65). There is also, of course, an element of Browning's habitual reluctance to speak out directly in his own voice.

35 Balaustions's Adventure (1871) and Aristophanes' Apology (1875) were written in defence of Euripides and of himself. DeVane writes that 'Browning was conscious that his exposition of Euripides' poetic principles represented in good part a justification of his own poetic principles. Moreover, Browning was defending himself against a contemporary attack, for "Dogface Eruxis" of ll. 1671-6 was Alfred Austin' (Handbook, p. 382).

36 His identification with Shelley is both on a personal and a poetic level. On the personal level, his piece on Shelley's atheism reminds one of Browning's own adolescent 'growing-pains', 'those passionate, impatient struggles of a boy towards distant truth and love. . . . Crude convictions of boyhood, conveyed in imperfect and inapt forms of speech,--for such things all boys have been pardoned. There are growing-pains, accompanied by temporary distortion, of the soul also' ('Essay', p. 74). There are traces of this in Pauline, and, because he himself moved back to Christianity, he believes that 'had Shelley lived he would have finally ranged himself with the Christians' (p. 78). The poetic level of identification I shall examine in the main text.

37 This view can also be supported by the fact that the great poets at the start of the movement, for example, Wordsworth and

Coleridge, are regarded by Browning as being furthest from the reality of his times. It is significant that Browning derived next to nothing from Wordsworth, and clearly did not think highly of his talents (see Kintner I, 464, and, II, 986). Also, while scenery or nature inspired much of Wordsworth's poetry, it seldom inspired Browning. The editors of New Letters, DeVane and Knickerbocker, draw attention to Browning's lack of enthusiasm for such a typically Romantic scene as the Grande Chartreuse. They write, 'Browning's noncommittal response to the romantic wonders of the Grande Chartreuse--"very interesting", he says--stands in contrast to the whole romantic tradition and to the attitude of his contemporaries, particularly Matthew Arnold' (p. 267, n. 2). In fact what Browning does do is to project himself into the Grande Chartreuse. He writes, 'inspected a cell, and fancied I could manage to inhabit such an one, with the library (a good one) at my disposal' (p. 267). His view seems extremely practical and decidedly non-poetic, but his remarks have the tone of 'Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister', 'Fra Lippo Lippi', and 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb'. His interest is in the human life lived within the scene, and not with the scene itself.

38 The idea of this balance may have been suggested by Shelley's own observation regarding Homer and Sophocles. Their superiority over 'succeeding writers consists in the presence of those thoughts which belong to the inner faculties of our nature, not in the absence of those which are connected with the external: their incomparable perfection consists in a harmony of the union of all' ('A Defence of Poetry', p. 39). There are several other parallels between Browning's thoughts on poetry and Shelley's 'Defence'. For example, Shelley's idea that poetry 'creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration' (p. 56), and that 'poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' (p. 33), resembles the views of Fra Lippo Lippi:

For, don't you mark, we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see.

(300-02)

Browning's subjective poet's devotion to 'the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth' ('Essay', p. 65), reminds one of Shelley's 'a poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one' ('Defence', p. 27). In fact Shelley's general description of poetry is similar to Browning's description of subjective poetry, and if Shelley is regarded as Browning's example of the ideal subjective poet (in contrast to the ideal objective poet, Shakespeare), then the 'Essay' has a balance which is lacking if Shelley is not seen as an ideal type of subjective poet (albeit one who is presented as moving towards a blend of both faculties). If one accepts this interpretation, then Shelley's subjective poetry, which Browning stresses as being the work of a 'whole poet', stands in contrast to the false subjective poetry of some of the Romantics and of Browning's contemporaries. This reading strengthens my general argument that the 'Essay' is strongly related to the poetic situation of Browning's own time and also makes Shelley an integral part of Browning's revelation of this situation.

Chapter Two

BROWNING'S POETIC THEORY:
CONCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Its subject-matter and treatment are both so startlingly original, and both so likely to be altogether misunderstood; it embraces in its development so many of the highest questions, and glances with such a masterly perception at some of the deepest problems, of man's existence; that we feel, while to touch upon these various topics will not interfere with the object we first proposed, it is only in this way that a proper and just appreciation of the singular power and beauty, even of the dramatic portions of this poem, can be conveyed to the reader.

John Forster, on Paracelsus, New Monthly Magazine,
46 (1836), 289-308 (p. 290)

Whoever has followed out the history of poetry during the last thirty years, must have observed a great change in the subjects selected for treatment, as well as in the manner of treating them. The entity 'nature', which before the present era of poetry absorbed so large a proportion of our aesthetic energies, has in its turn been absorbed by the real being, man; and the great bulk of poetic force is now brought to bear on the treatment of man, and of man alone.

H.B. Forman, 'Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology',
London Quarterly Review, 32 (1869), 325-57
(p. 332, footnote)

These quotations introduce several of the most important themes to be dealt with in this chapter. First, it is to be observed that Forster and Forman emphasize novelty in both subject and treatment, and this recalls E.B.B.'s words to Browning that 'we want new forms . . . as well as thoughts'. It is interesting that Forster in 1836 should put this

same emphasis on Browning's new approach to subject and treatment as Forman was to do in 1869. Forman in his review writes that 'Pauline is the natural ancestor of The Ring and the Book: these two, his earliest and latest known poems, are the terminal vertebrae of the spinal column of his works regarded as a body' (p. 331). In other words, Forman regards Browning's poetry as forming a coherent pattern of development, and if this view is accepted, one should be able to detect consistent aims and interests which may reasonably be interpreted as Browning's poetic theory. I shall argue that Browning's poetic theory is, like his 'Essay on Shelley', particularly concerned with the position and problems of poetry in his own era.

Forman's article places Browning at the head of the movement of poetic development in the age, a movement which involves poetry in the concerns of modern life. He notes the 'Renaissance poetry' of the Rossettis, Mr Bell Scott, Morris, and others, but doubts whether 'Chaucerian [or] Pre-Raphaelite poetry is likely to be further developed by another generation of workers, not being thoroughly in keeping with the contemporary aspect of things' (p. 330). He regards Browning as the leader of what he calls 'the Psychological School' of poetry which has 'a wide applicability to the idealisation of the intellectual and emotional phases of being which, in modern city life, are so intensified as to preponderate immensely in importance over the life of physical activity' (p. 330). My main point here is to stress Browning's integral relationship with the whole movement of poetry in the Victorian period, even though this relationship is very often one of disagreement and debate. His originality and individuality have, I feel, been misinterpreted and have tended to obscure this important relationship.¹

Forman, looking back over 'the history of poetry during the last

thirty years', sees a general movement away from Romantic poetry, characterized by a concentration of 'aesthetic energies' on '"nature"', to a new exclusive concern with man. Forster in his review of Paracelsus notes Browning's particular perception of 'some of the deepest problems, of man's existence'. In this chapter I shall elaborate upon Browning's turning away from Romanticism, a trend already partially explored in the section on his 'Essay on Shelley'. Forster's point, that 'a proper and just appreciation' of Browning's Paracelsus necessitates some examination of Browning's exploration of topics dealing with 'the deepest problems, of man's existence', relates back to my argument in the opening chapter that Victorian poetry and poetic theory must be viewed from a broad perspective which values the content of poetry and the expansive range of that content: a narrowly aesthetic view is inappropriate and cannot possibly lead to a 'proper and just appreciation'.

The Victorians, as I argued earlier, were very vague as to what exactly constituted a poem, and although Arnold could write of the wholesome and regulative laws of poetry in his Preface of 1853, the validity of these laws was a matter of some debate (see Chapter Three). The broad perspective, a view which expected poetry to engage itself with every aspect of life, meant that the idea of a 'proper subject-matter' was also a matter of intense debate. As John L. Tupper noted in 'The Subject in Art' (1850), the dominant question was whether poetry could take up a subject-matter directly relevant to the life of the times without 'jeopardizing [its own] specific existence'.

The implications of Tupper's statement can receive no better illustration than the criticisms made of Browning's works. Forster says that Paracelsus cannot be properly appreciated unless one examines

Browning's 'masterly perception [of] some of the deepest problems, of man's existence'. On the other hand, Alfred Austin in 'The Poetry of the Period' (1869), declared that Paracelsus 'was not a poem, whatever the writer meant it for.' It 'was full of thought; not poetical thought' (p. 318). He goes on to say: 'Mr Browning not having a poetical organisation, but rather a philosophical one, cannot, in his assumed role of poet, assimilate into verse these fresh scientific theories' (p. 319), and calls Browning a 'poetico-philosophical hybrid' (p. 321). Austin's views are echoed throughout Browning criticism. Even as sympathetic a critic as H.C. Duffin, in Amphibian (1956), could write that, 'Browning was not a "pure poet" . . . a rich satisfying loam of thought is lightly covered by a scanty crop of poetic grasses' (p. 251), and, 'the voice and the medium are those of a poet, but the thought is distinguishably that of a moralist or a philosopher. The statement that form and content are inseparable is true only of pure poetry' (p. 56).

My intention here has been to show that what has often been taken as a problem peculiar to Browning is really a problem at the heart of Victorian poetics as a whole, as Tupper's article, makes clear. In the previous chapter I suggested that Browning regarded subject and treatment as inseparable, and yet he has been accused, by even the most sympathetic of critics, of not being a pure poet, and hence of allowing for the separation of form and content. Alfred Austin called him a 'poetico-philosophical hybrid'. Browning himself saw Euripides, with whom he identified, as tending to 'poetize philosophy' (Aristophanes' Apology, 2115). There is a subtle but very important difference between the two views: Austin, and so many of Browning's critics and admirers, see Browning as throwing out philosophical gems amid a clutter of obscure

verse (Berdoe went so far as to make a 'serious attempt to suck each verse dry of its wonderful teaching'²), Browning regards Euripides and himself as making poetry out of philosophy. From one point of view poetry destroys itself by overstepping its limits and so losing its 'specific existence'; from the other, poetry extends its boundaries to become, in Arnold's phrase, a 'magister vitae'. The difference, I believe, depends on what is understood by poetry, as Browning fully realized.

Browning's letter to Ruskin of 10 December 1855 introduces and forms the centre of this study of what Browning understood by poetry. From this centre I shall examine Browning's distinction between subject and conception, the difference between Browning's view of poetry and popular expectations as to what poetry is, and Browning's ideas about poetic development. I shall argue that Aristophanes' Apology is, like the 'Essay on Shelley', mainly concerned with the state of poetry in his own age, and from this point to the end of the chapter, I shall show how Browning attempts to meet the most important criticisms directed against poetry, particularly those that allege that it is of no relevance to modern man.

The whole chapter, however, is concerned with establishing what Browning understands by poetry. The divisions within the chapter are fluid, marking no more than an expansion or development of some particular aspect of Browning's concept of poetry. As in the letter to Ruskin, there can be no sharp demarcation between a discussion of poetic language, of how poetry differs from prose, or of how one should read poetry: each discussion flows into the other and contributes to a comprehension of Browning's understanding of poetry.

I

I know that I don't make out my conception by my language; all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me paint it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my 'glaciers', as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there;--suppose it sprang over there? In prose you may criticise so--because that is the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history--but in asking for more ultimates you must accept less mediates, nor expect that a Druid stone-circle will be traced for you with as few breaks to the eye as the North Crescent and South Crescent that go together so cleverly in many a suburb. Why, you look at my little song as if it were Hobbs' or Nobbs' lease of his house, or testament of his devisings.

Robert Browning to John Ruskin, 10 December 1855, in W.G. Collingwood, The Life and Works of John Ruskin, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1893) I, 199-202 (p. 200)

This letter from Browning to Ruskin is frequently quoted since it is one of those rare and important letters in which Browning writes directly about his own art. Immediately before the passage quoted, Browning says, 'We don't read poetry the same way, by the same law; it is too clear. I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licences to me which you demur at altogether.' The letter is mainly a development of this point: that Browning's idea of poetry is very different from Ruskin's, and indeed from the vast majority of his Victorian contemporaries.

For the successful communication of his conception, Browning emphasizes the necessity of the co-operation of the reader in accepting innovations in his poetic presentation of his subject-matter. In effect Browning attempts an absolute integration of those elements of poetic

theory discussed in the previous chapter: the poet, poem, and audience. This is the 'perfect shield' of the 'Essay on Shelley', the simultaneous expression of the subjective and objective vision in poetry which would be the perfect communication of the poet's conception. It is to be observed that Browning chooses the word 'conception' and not 'subject'.

His argument in the letter to Ruskin is very similar to the one he puts into the mouth of Fra Lippo Lippi. Lippo's Prior, like Ruskin, would have the artist 'paint it all plain out':

'Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!
 Strikes in the Prior: 'when your meaning's plain
 It does not say to folk--remember matins,
 Or, mind you fast next Friday!' Why, for this
 What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
 Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best.
 A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.
 (316-22)

The purpose of art is not to 'instigate' to action, or to 'say', and so 'take the Prior's pulpit-place' (310). This suggests that Browning prefers the word 'conception' because it implies something which cannot be reduced to direct statement. Fra Lippo Lippi suggests that a work of art allows for a communion of minds--'Art was given for that; / God uses us to help each other so, / Lending our minds out' (my emphasis, 304-306). For Browning his poetry succeeds if it bears 'the conception from me to you.'

This distinction between subject-matter and conception is of importance to Browning's poetic theory, and the confusion of subject with conception has led to misunderstandings as to what Browning attempted to do in his poetry. For example, while it is true that many of the subjects of his poems were based on fact, the letter to Ruskin makes it very clear that Browning did not advocate 'the absolute representation of portions of truth' as being the aim of poetry. Betty S. Flowers in

Browning and the Modern Tradition (1976) writes that, 'Although many of Browning's readers eventually seemed to come to terms with his dramatic style and with his "harsh versification", these same readers never quite came to accept his subject-matter' (p. 40). She goes on to say that 'Browning's insistence on the facts was at the heart of the misunderstanding he encountered from his readers. Many readers could sympathise with a concern for truth, but saw truth as having more to do with beauty, or great ideas, or significant actions, than with ugly facts and commonplace actions' (p. 42).

There was, however, a substantial body of Victorian critics who supported a subject-matter of realism and the commonplace. Aubrey De Vere in the Edinburgh Review (1849) wrote that 'a certain degree of plainness is absolutely necessary to keep a poet vulgar . . . that is, catholic . . . on the highways of life, leaving its byways to those who lack the faculty which elicits the beautiful from common things' (p. 363). Again in 1849, Coventry Patmore wrote:

Whatever is, is the legitimate subject of art. So far, indeed, is it from being confined to that which is in itself attractive, that art may safely employ facts and images which are rightly banished from ordinary conversation. If modern art is tender upon this score, it is less to its praise than to its disgrace and degradation, as not apprehending its high privilege of deriving from the entire universe a perfect and universal language. (p. 459)

The central difficulty with Browning's poetry was that his conception of his subject was not always clear to his audience. The objections to Browning's subject-matter were not directed primarily at the subjects themselves, but at Browning's apparent failure to make such subjects poetic: Browning neither offered a clear moral lesson to justify his exploration of the ugly or commonplace, nor did he soften the harshness

of a subject to make it more palatable.

These points are neatly illustrated by G. Brimley writing in Fraser's Magazine in 1856. He admires Browning's choice of subjects because they do not ignore the less pleasant aspects of life, 'he shrinks from no facts, does not pick his path with delicate step along the world's highway, fearful of dirtying his feet'; but complains 'that he has been satisfied with this, that the stir, and business, and passion of the scene has been all he cared for; that what it all meant has seldom seemed to occur to him as worth asking. . . . Not only does he not attempt to solve the moral problems which a wide experience of men presents to him; he will not even take the trouble to write the problems out legibly for others to study' (my emphasis, p. 106). Again like Lippi's Prior and John Ruskin, this critic would have Browning 'paint it all plain out'. In fact his whole criticism of Browning's work closely resembles the criticisms which Fra Lippo Lippi answers in his monologue. 'What it all meant' is exactly the artist's concern--'this world's no blot for us . . . To find its meaning is my meat and drink' (313, 315)--but the artist's conception of his subject (which includes his understanding of what it all means) cannot be written out 'legibly'.

In his letter Browning says to Ruskin: 'We don't read poetry the same way, by the same law'. The obvious questions are 'how did Browning regard poetry and how did this differ from the expectations of his audience?' The second question may be answered in part by looking at some of the criticisms of Browning's poetry made by his contemporaries. Sir J. Skelton in 1863 attempted to analyse the reasons for Browning's unpopularity:

Yet his unpopularity may be accounted for. He is not the poet to be perused with profit in the nursery or in a railway-carriage. He does not relish a platitude as Mr Longfellow does, nor does his verse move with the same supple smoothness and graceful facility. He is not a rhetorician, like Lord Macaulay. Unlike Pope's, his couplet does not carry a sting in its tail. He does not care to be 'effective': 'Point' is not his strong point. His meaning, besides, does not always lie on the surface. It has to be sought with diligence and close attention. Thus, to those who read while they run, he is commonly obscure, and often incomprehensible.
(p. 240)

In pointing out the reasons for Browning's unpopularity, Skelton hints at the popular demands made of the poets and echoed by several critics. For example, G. Brimley (from whom I quoted earlier) goes on to say that,

We believe that Mr Browning might, had he chosen, have become the interpreter of our modern life. . . . We believe that he could have sung the passions and the thoughts of our time with a lyric intensity which would have purified the rough ore of our life of its prosaic dross, and have reacted on that life to make it deeper, truer, and more human. (p. 106)

Browning's subject-matter is extremely diverse, ranging from the exotic and historical to the common and contemporary. Yet in all this diversity he consistently attracted criticism as to his choice and treatment of subject. The key to this criticism can be gleaned from the examples quoted above: Browning does not tell the reader in a direct way what he is to make of the subject. "'Point' is not his strong point. His meaning, besides, does not always lie on the surface.' 'Mr Browning might . . . have become the interpreter of our modern life.'

It would seem that the general opinion was that poetry should instruct, and the main criticism of Browning is that he does not make his instruction explicit. Yet in his letter to Ruskin he seems to agree that poetry has a didactic function--'[Poetry] is all teaching . . .

and the people hate to be taught.' But there is a difference between Browning's idea of how poetry should teach and the ideas of most of his contemporaries. He writes to Ruskin, 'Do you think poetry was ever generally understood or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already, as they know it' (my emphasis). Here Browning touches on one of the strongest Victorian desires--the desire for reassurance: Browning does not offer the comfort of presenting a subject in a form commonly acceptable to his audience. Neither does he soften reality, purifying 'the rough ore of our life of its prosaic dross'. In many poems Browning concentrates on just what this critic would call life's 'prosaic dross'. Browning questions the general understanding of what poetry is supposed to do. He questions whether poetry is supposed to 'tell' people something, and also whether it should present its subject in a manner and form familiar to the audience, reassuring the audience by confirming its understanding of the subject.

In 'Fra Lippo Lippi' the artist rejects the 'saying' function of art. To the Prior's criticism of 'It does not say to folk--remember matins' (318), Fra Lippo Lippi replies, 'Why, for this / What need of art at all?' (319-20). He argues that,

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

(300-06)³

Art is not a direct 'telling'; the meaning or instructive value comes through the medium of the art itself. The poet's or artist's conception is communicated through his use of poetry or paint, so that, in effect, we see with the artist's eyes.

The tone of the criticisms of Browning's work suggests that many of his contemporaries read poetry primarily to extract worthy lessons or to share elevating thoughts. The poetry itself seems almost to be regarded as an obstacle to the main objective, or at best no more than a pleasurable accompaniment to the main interest. For Browning the poetry is the meaning or conception of the subject. Poetry cannot be reduced to a direct statement, 'a skull and bones' kind of art, it is a lending out of the poet's mind, a sharing of a vision.

Fra Lippo Lippi, as I pointed out earlier, does not advocate a photographic realism. He may say, 'God's works--paint anyone, and count it crime / To let a truth slip' (295-96), but he also says, 'To find [the world's] meaning is my meat and drink' (315). The artist may paint what we have seen or shunned a hundred times, and he may paint a realistic representation of the subject, but his execution of the subject, in paint or poetry, allows us to see that subject in a new way. This is where Andrea del Sarto fails. He can paint a subject with a photographic realism which is 'faultless', but he cannot see the meaning of what he reproduces. Certainly, unlike Lippi, the world for Andrea does not mean 'intensely'--'All is silver-gray / Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!' (98-99). His art does not give his audience a new vision of the world but only communicates the same vision. While in 'Fra Lippo Lippi' the stress is on sight, in 'Andrea del Sarto' it is on limited and dim vision, 'And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt / Out of the grange whose four walls make his world' (169-70).

I return to the question asked earlier--What did Browning understand by poetry? Criticisms of Browning's style and subject-matter should be taken together since in Browning's view the poem is an organic whole. In the Ruskin letter, Browning says that 'the conception' is communicated

by 'touches and bits of outlines' and not by the 'language'. The whole poem--its form, metre, diction, and other such poetic means of expression--embodies the poet's conception of his subject. The poem 'succeeds if [it bears] the conception from me to you'. George Lewes recognizes this integral relationship of Browning's subject and style in his review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850). 'His style is swayed by the subject. It is a garment, not a mould; it takes the varying shapes of varied movement, and does not force its one monotony on all.'

Lewes's review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is not completely favourable, but it is a balanced appraisal which draws attention to those areas of Browning's work which are original. In fact it is originality which Lewes emphasizes--'Robert Browning has one inestimable quality--originality'. He is 'perhaps the only original poet of the day.' Lewes makes the point that Browning does not impose a style upon his subject. 'You must not be disconcerted with the rough realism of this poem, and complain of the tone being unsuitable to the gravity of the subject; with a keen eye for the truth Browning never idealizes: this is at once the source of his strength and of his weakness.' The subject of the poem is grave and elevated but Browning's treatment of the subject receives special comment by Lewes on two points. First, Browning does not idealize the subject but examines it in a realistic setting and manner; secondly, he does not express his subject in a tone or style corresponding to the seriousness of the subject regarded as an abstract topic. In other words, for Browning a poem about Christian belief and worship does not necessarily demand stately form and elevated language.⁴

This departure from popular expectations is obviously part of what

Browning means by 'teaching' in art: it is not telling people what they know already in the form in which they know it. The aim of the artist is to expand the vision of his audience. Lewes, however, also says that Browning 'is not a singer' and that 'in Browning's poems we miss the element of Beauty' and hence such a poem as Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day is not 'an enduring work of art'. 'Realism in Art has Truth as an aim, Ugliness as a pitfall.' While Lewes recognizes Browning's originality, he does not recognize that Browning's entire understanding of what poetry is is also original, and that his notion of what is beautiful and musical in poetry is different from conventional or earlier standards.

II

The main theme of the 'Essay on Shelley' is that poetry is not static and unchanging but is continually developing. Browning's whole concept of poetry--his idea of what is a proper subject for a poem, or of what is proper poetic language and expression--is governed by his theory of poetic development. In a letter to E.B.B. of 7 March 1846, Browning notes how,

in Music, the Beau Idéal changes every thirty years.
 . . . The sounds remain, keep their character perhaps--
 the scale's proportioned notes affect the same, that is,
 --the major third, or minor seventh--but the arrangement
 of these, the sequences--the law--for them,--if it should
 change every thirty years! (Kintner I, 523)

In his 'Parleying with Charles Avison' (1887) he extends these observations on music to man's perception of truth:

Truth--this attainment? Ah, but such and such
 Beliefs of yore seemed inexpugnable
 When we attained them! E'en as they, so will
 This their successor have the due morn, noon,
 Evening and night--just as an old-world tune
 Wears out and drops away, until who hears
 Smilingly questions--'This it was brought tears
 Once to all eyes,--this roused heart's rapture once?'
 So will it be with truth that, for the nonce,
 Styles itself truth perennial.

(XII)

In section XIV he speaks of 'Truth which endures resetting'.

In Fifine at the Fair (1872) Browning seems to apply this theory
 to all the arts:

[The artist] expresses hates, loves, fears and hopes in Art:
 The forms, the themes--no one without its counterpart
 Ages ago; no one but, mumbled the due time
 I' the mouth of the eater, needs be cooked again in rhyme,
 Dished up anew in paint, sauce-smothered fresh in sound,
 To suit the wisdom-tooth, just cut, of the age.

(XCII)

It is to be observed that in these quotations Browning makes it clear
 that there is a point of stability--truth, or in music the sounds them-
 selves--but man's apprehension of these absolutes changes, and demands
 new expression. In the letter to E.B.B. he states that there is no
 stable artistic 'law'. The little phrase in the quotation from 'Avison',
 'for the nonce', recalls his remarks about his own poetry in the
 'Epilogue' to his Pacchiarotto volume (1876)--'Sweet for the future,--
 strong for the nonce!' (XIV). Again there is the idea of something
 invariable being subjected to the mutability of man's apprehension.
 'Mighty and mellow be born at once' but in one age it tastes 'strong',
 in another, 'sweet'.⁵

In her reply to Browning's letter of 7 March 1846, E.B.B. writes:

And why should music & the philosophy of it make you 'melancholy', ever dearest, more than the other arts, which each has the seal of the age, modifying itself after a fashion & to one? Because it changes more, perhaps. Yet all the Arts are mediators between the soul & the Infinite, . . . shifting always like a mist, between the Breath on this side, & the Light on that side . . . shifting and coloured:--mediators, messengers, projected from the Soul, to go and feel, for Her, out there! (Kintner I, 526)

From these letters it would seem that the point of stability, the unchanging element of art, lies outside the art-form. This is perhaps more clearly expressed in the 'Essay on Shelley': 'it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned' (p. 67). 'All the bad poetry in the world . . . will be found to result from some . . . discrepancy . . . between [the poet's] work and the verities of nature' (pp. 69-70). The absolute is truth, but Browning noticeably makes truth a much more tangible concept than E.B.B. by finding its manifestation in 'the verities of nature' or 'this world'.

In both E.B.B.'s letter and Browning's 'Essay', art is seen as a mediator between truth and man, and while truth (the 'Infinite', the ideal 'Her, out there', or the manifestations of such in the 'verities of nature') remains constant, the Arts themselves are 'shifting always like a mist', modifying themselves according to the 'fashion', or, as Browning calls it, 'the Idea . . . the general standard', of the age.

In his poem 'Development', in Asolando (1889), these ideas receive their most extended treatment. The 'truth' in this case is 'ethics', the true or proper way to live, the artist is Browning's father, and his art is the mediator between the difficult truth and his audience. Browning senior's art is modified to suit 'the general standard' of his

audience, the young Robert Browning. The development of the art-form, its complexity and difficulty, its balance of entertainment and instruction, is directly linked to the development of mankind, here represented by the young Browning himself. Of his father's version of the Iliad, Browning writes:

So far I rightly understood the case
 At five years old: a huge delight it proved
 And still proves--thanks to that instructor sage
 My Father, who knew better than turn straight
 Learning's full flare on weak-eyed ignorance.
(17-21)

As Browning's scholarship grows he encounters studies which question the veracity of the Iliad, and which prove: 'there was never any Troy at all', 'No actual Homer, no authentic text' (69, 71). He concludes by saying that while his 'gains' could have been acquired through reading the Ethics, with 'no pretty lying', it is, he says,

a treatise I find hard
 To read aright now that my hair is grey,
 And I can manage the original.
 At five years old--how ill had fared its leaves!
(109-12)

The poem is generally accepted as being in part a comment upon the Higher Criticism of the Bible: the form in which God (the Father) provided man with His Truth was attuned to man's level of understanding, and, as with Homer's Iliad, its defects in factual or historical accuracy do not invalidate its contribution to man's understanding of truth. However my main interest in the poem is what it adds to our understanding of Browning's poetic theory, and it is possible to see this--the inter-relationship of the development of poetry and the development of man--as the poem's main theme.

'Development' bears a striking resemblance to a particular passage in 'A Death in the Desert' (1864):

'I say that man was made to grow, not stop;
That help, he needed once, and needs no more,
Having grown but an inch by, is withdrawn:
For he hath new needs, and new helps to these.
This imports solely, man should mount on each
New height in view; the help whereby he mounts,
The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,
Since all things suffer change save God the Truth
Man apprehends Him newly at each stage.'
(424-32)

This relates back to the letters quoted earlier, and especially to E.B.B.'s letter. The artist, in Browning's opinion, always strives towards a representation and/or interpretation of truth. The arts constantly change according to man's 'new needs' and new apprehension of Truth. In the 'Parleying with Charles Avison', Browning, while certainly recognizing and differentiating between the different arts, discerns the common 'endeavour' of 'all Arts'. He says:

What's known once is known ever: Arts arrange,
Dissociate, re-distribute, interchange
Part with part, lengthen, broaden, high or deep
Construct their bravest,--still such pains produce
Change, not creation.
(VIII)

Here again Browning is contrasting the essential constancy of truth with the inability of art or man ever to capture 'Truth's very heart of truth'.

He denies to art the word 'creation' and in The Ring and the Book he also carefully avoids the word 'creation'. This is more than the conventional distinction between God and the human artist (although this also plays a part). In fact, in The Ring and the Book, Browning makes it man's duty to attempt creation. Man is 'forced to try and make,

else fail to grow,-- / Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain / The good beyond him' (I, 714-16).⁶ The context of this passage, lines 707-21, makes it clear that Browning is discussing exactly this distinction. However, 'man's proportionate result' is not creation but resuscitation ('Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps'). The implication is clear: in Browning's view the poet does not create, but rather brings to life that which already exists or did exist. 'Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse? / Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?' (The Ring and the Book I, 696-97).

For Browning, the poet makes an already existent truth real or alive to his audience. Like Arnold, he believes that art should interpret what surrounds and concerns mankind so 'as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense' of things ('Maurice de Guérin', 1863, CPW III, 13). But the all important difference between Browning's and Arnold's vision of poetry is that Arnold regards poetry as a stable factor ('the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws', Preface, 1853) which must contend with 'the bewildering confusion' of the changes in the age, while Browning regards art as the changeable element, and reality as the eternal 'starting-point and basis' of the artist's new interpretation of truth. Art does not form a permanent 'mould' in which truth is kept 'unalterably' ('Charles Avison', VIII).

Browning's theory of poetic development allows him to transcend problems which greatly disturb his contemporaries. First, 'the bewildering confusion' of the age does not alter Browning's belief that the essential truths remain even though they appear in new forms and must be apprehended in new ways. Secondly, because the development of poetry coincides with the development of man, and because it always

concerns itself with 'this world', the reality of the age, poetry cannot be regarded as an anachronism, as something extraneous to the age, nor can it be regarded as a static and changeless art-form, limited in its range of subjects, language, and forms. Browning's vision of the cycles of poetry in his 'Essay on Shelley' is remarkable because he is careful to make a connection between poetic history and temporal history.

In Peacock's 'The Four Ages of Poetry' (1820) no such connection is made and no real poetic development occurs. A poet 'lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs, and exploded superstitions' (p. 16). 'While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance' (p. 15). Poetry is a limited form which has exhausted itself. Peacock writes:

Good sense and elegant learning, conveyed in polished and somewhat monotonous verse, are the perfection of the original and imitative poetry of civilized life. Its range is limited, and when exhausted, nothing remains but the crambe repetita of common-place, which at length becomes thoroughly wearisome, even to the most indefatigable readers of the newest new nothings. (p. 10)

The age of brass, or the Romantic age, is described as similarly repetitive, a mere return to earlier more primitive modes of poetry. In Peacock's view, then, the cycles of poetry are self-enclosed cycles, with no relation to reality.

Elsewhere in his essay Peacock suggests that the metre and language of poetry now seem monotonous. Macaulay in his essay 'Milton' (1825) also suggests that poetic language is out of place in modern life: 'language, the machine of the poet, is best fitted for his purpose in

its rudest state. . . . the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half-civilised people is poetical' (p. 3b). Peacock's central argument is that poetry does not, and cannot, contribute to modern life:

[Poetry] can never make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life a useful or rational man. It cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life, of which we have witnessed so many and so rapid advances. (p. 17)

It was this damning observation which the Victorians attempted to answer, but which always remained to disturb their evaluation of poetry.

What is understood as being the function of the poet and the use or value of poetry determines what is expected of poetry. It is interesting to compare my last quotation from Peacock with Carlyle's description of the poet in his lecture 'The Hero as Poet' (1840):

The Poet who could merely sit on a chair, and compose stanzas, would never make a stanza worth much. He could not sing the Heroic warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic warrior too. I fancy there is in him the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher;--in one or the other degree, he could have been, he is all these. (Works V, 78-79)

There would seem to be a vast difference between the views of Peacock and Carlyle. Carlyle's poet, unlike Peacock's, is 'a product of these new ages'. While Peacock argues that the poet can never be a philosopher, statesman, or rational man, Carlyle argues that the true poet must be 'the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher' if he is to be of any use in 'these new ages'.

Yet while in theory poetry may expand to become a 'magister vitae', in Arnold's phrase, in the practice of poetry Carlyle and Arnold did not envisage any extension or change in the art-form. Carlyle was

notorious for his advice to poets to write in prose. In Heroes he writes:

Rhyme that had no inward necessity to be rhymed:--
it ought to have told us plainly, without any jingle,
what it was aiming at. I would advise all men who
can speak their thought, not to sing it; to under-
stand that, in a serious time, among serious men,
there is no vocation in them for singing it. (p. 91)

Peacock compared a love of poetry to the baby's delight in 'the jingle of silver bells' (p. 18). Both men use the word 'jingle', the suggestion is that poetic language and metre are to be regarded as trivial distractions.

John Ruskin similarly attempts to make a case for the value and utility of art. He writes: 'fine art [has], and could have, but three functions: the enforcing of the religious sentiments of men, the perfecting their ethical state, and the doing them material service'.⁷ Art contributes to 'the practical requirement of human life' by giving 'Form to knowledge, and Grace to utility'.⁸ But in another work he advises his reader never 'write any poetry yourself; there is, perhaps, rather too much than too little in the world already'.⁹ This ambiguous view of the value of poetry or art is well expressed in an article entitled 'The Ethics of Art' (1849) by Coventry Patmore.

Patmore writes that, 'the supreme power of art [is] in extending the vision of the soul', but an 'increased breadth of mental vision demands, but does not always give, a proportionate increase of mental strength'. The arts are 'the main props of spiritual life' but instead of strengthening and correcting, they may be 'likely to increase the kind of weakness which they are suited to correct' (p. 450). As with Carlyle and Ruskin, Patmore balances his praise of art with doubts as to its worth in practice. It is to be noted that Patmore regards the arts as functional tools and particularly as tools which are to maintain

stability--'the main props of spiritual life'. Arnold in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880) writes: 'In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay' (my emphasis, CPW IX, 163). Arnold sees poetry as the stable fixed anchor in the current of historical change ('as time goes on').

These views give an indication of the ambiguous position of poetry in the Victorian period. Peacock and Macaulay point the way to the mid-century uncertainty as to the practical value of poetry, and also to the belief that poetry was an out-moded art-form of jingle and song, out of tune 'in a serious time, among serious men'. Although the Arnold essay dates from 1880, it derives from the mid-century core of Victorian criticism, and its relation to the Preface of 1853 is obvious. The importance of Arnold is that he brings to the surface the assumption which underlies all of these views--poetry itself does not change with the developments and changes affecting mankind. Browning very clearly differs from most of his contemporaries by making the relationship between the development of poetry and the development of mankind central to his understanding of poetry. In Aristophanes' Apology he again makes this the essential difference between the innovator, Euripides, and the conservative, Aristophanes. In this poem Browning discusses innovations in every element of poetry: poetry itself is reinterpreted and reformed to match man's changing perception of truth.

III

Browning's Aristophanes' Apology (1875), is, I believe, like the 'Essay on Shelley', an examination of the position of poetry in his own age. Arnold's opening to his essay 'The Study of Poetry' expresses a theme to be found throughout the period, from Carlyle in the 1830s onwards: 'There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve' (CPW IX, 161). Aristophanes, sounding very like Arnold, gives instance of 'a restless change, / Deterioration' (2024-25) which

makes all we seemed to know prove ignorance
 Yet knowledge also, since, on either side
 Of any question, something is to say,
 Nothing to 'stablish, all things to disturb!
 (2041-44)

Just as Arnold was to declare in his essay 'more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us', Aristophanes says, 'One last resource is left us--poetry!' (2099). The key issue of the poem, as in the letter to Ruskin, is the proper understanding of poetry and its function.

Aristophanes' Apology makes it very clear that Browning is as much aware of the turbulence of his times as anyone, but, as in the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning's concern is not to use poetry to serve the needs of the age, but to determine the character of poetry at this point in poetic history so as to carry on the process of poetic and human development. The common demand is 'To save Sense, poet!' (2102), which again recalls Arnold, 'Sanity,--that is the great virtue of the ancient literature; the want of that is the great defect of the

modern' (conclusion to the Preface, Second Edition of Poems, 1854).

In Aristophanes' Apology the demand goes on: 'Change things back! / Or better, strain a point the other way / And handsomely exaggerate wronged truth!' (2107-09).

The suggestion is that the poet should maintain the values and standards under attack from the forces of change and development. The poet should write of heroes, conventional religion, and beautiful subjects. He is 'sworn to serve / Each Grace' (2154-55), 'born for just that roseate world' (2156), 'where he makes beauty out of ugliness' (2158), 'encircled with poetic atmosphere, / As lark emballed by its own crystal song' (2163-64). But for Euripides and for Browning this is not the function of poetry: poetry should 'extend [change] rather than restrain' (2116). In other words, poetry must develop with man and so maintain its essential bond with the real world, its basis in truth. To be 'as lark emballed by its own crystal song', (with 'emballed' there is also perhaps a suggestion of 'embalmed'), is 'unreality! the real / [The poet] wants, not falsehood,--truth alone he seeks, / Truth, for all beauty!' (2166-68).

Aristophanes' Apology is no simple statement of Browning's poetic views. The reader must judge for himself what it is that poetry should do. Aristophanes' arguments are not lightly dismissed. Browning recognizes the strong 'instinct for social coherence' (as Northrop Frye put it). To Euripides' 'And what's most ugly proves most beautiful' (2172), Aristophanes says, 'So much assistance from Euripides!' In other words, what good does this kind of art do? Is it not a spoiling of art and a waste of life?

Spoil your art as you renounce your life,
 Poetize your so precious system, do,
 Degrade the hero, nullify the god,
 Exhibit women, slave and men as peers
 (2176-79)

Again one may see something of Arnold's views in this, especially those expressed in the Preface of 1853, with its praise of the 'grand style', heroes such as 'Achilles, Prometheus', and 'immortal beauty'. But Browning is questioning more than one critic's opinions, he is examining the central attitudes and interests current in his age.

The hero was a major topic of poetic debate; Carlyle is only the most obvious example of the interest in this topic. Aubrey De Vere in the Edinburgh Review (1849) observed that,

if modern society has reached a higher average of decorous virtue; yet individual robustness,--and therefore character,--like intellectual greatness, is rarer than it was in ruder times. . . . A certain social uniformity ensues, exercising a retarding force . . . destroying men's humours, idiosyncrasies, and spontaneous emotions. . . . Men are thus, as it were, cast in a mould. (p. 360)

E.S. Dallas in The Gay Science (1866) took issue with Tennyson's 'the individual withers, and the world is more and more'. He wrote in reply that 'if individuals fail as heroes, still they flourish and are of more account than ever as men' (II, 272).

If one compares the quotation above (2176-79) from Browning's Aristophanes' Apology with a passage from The Gay Science it is possible to argue that if Browning had any particular critic in mind it may have been Dallas--the resemblance between the two passages is striking.

Dallas writes:

the weak and the foolish [are] made much of, and treated as of equal account with heroes and demigods, while, at the same time, we hear no word of a supernatural grace . . . by which the weakness of man can be rendered of so much importance, and out of the mouth of a fool so much wisdom may proceed.
(II, 308)

Dallas concludes by saying:

Thus it appears that the withering of the hero and the flourishing of the private individual, which I have ventured to describe as being (for art at least) the most salient characteristic of our time, is but the last and most complete development of a tendency which belongs to modern art and literature more or less from their first dawn, and separates them, as by a great gulf, from the art, the literature, and the life antique. (II, 325-26)

Euripides, accused in Aristophanes' Apology of contributing to what Dallas calls 'the withering of the hero', is regarded by Browning as anticipating the modern age. In The Ring and the Book, Euripides breaks from 'the life antique' by almost guessing 'at that Paul knew' (X, 1723). Browning identifies with Euripides because for Browning he symbolizes development--man's will to strive forward, his 'aspiration to the pure and true' (X, 1690), both in life and art.

Browning's theory of development affects his whole view of poetry. After outlining the 'restless change' of the age, and turning to the 'one last resource . . . --poetry!', the debate of Aristophanes' Apology centres on the question of what is the best kind of poetry. Euripides inclines 'to poetize philosophy' (2115). He asks 'are heroes men? No more, and scarce as much, / Shall mine be represented' (2117-18). 'Do they use speech? Ay, street-terms, market-phrase!' (2120) 'I paint men as they are--so runs my boast-- / Not as they should be' (2129-30). 'Strength and utility charm more than grace' (2171). This is Aristophanes'

critical view of Euripides' art but there are enough parallels to what Browning says elsewhere to make it evident that Browning accepts and presents these remarks as aspects of his own art. For example, his remark on 'strength and utility' is much the same as what he wrote in 'The Twins'--'Bloomed fables--flowers on furze, / The better the uncouth: / Do roses stick like burrs?'; and in a letter of 1855 to John Kenyon:

In your remarks on the little or no pleasure you derive from dramatic--in comparison with lyric . . . --I partake of your feeling to a great degree: lyric is the oldest, most natural, most poetical [form] of poetry, and I would always get it if I could: but I find in these latter days that one has a great deal to say, and try and get attended to, which is out of the lyrical element and capability--and I am forced to take the nearest way to it: and then it is undeniable that the common reader is susceptible to plot, story, and the simplest form of putting a matter.¹⁰

The letter makes it clear that the period, 'these latter days', demands a less lyrical, beautiful and graceful kind of poetry. Euripides' boast 'I paint men as they are' closely resembles what Browning says in 'Old Pictures in Florence' (1855), 'paint man man, whatever the issue' (xix). Again the theme of the poem is the relationship between the development of man and of art.

'Old Pictures in Florence' concentrates on the differences between the beautiful ideal art of classical Greece and the new rough art of Early Christian artists. The same kind of contrast is made in Aristophanes' Apology between the old ideals of classical Greece and the new harsh realism of Euripides. Browning accepts that there is a certain loss of beauty and grace, but to compensate for this there is freshness and truth. In the 'Essay on Shelley' he describes this process of development

as the replacement of an 'intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe' (p. 68). Again there is the suggestion of something worked smooth and familiar being replaced by something raw and unshaped. In the 'Essay' he goes on to say that this new poetry is 'prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight' (p. 68). It is an objective poetry, reflecting the world as men see it. This explains, to some extent, the subject-matter and the treatment of that subject-matter in Euripides' and Browning's poetry--'men as they are', expressed in the language of everyday life, 'street-terms, market-phrase'.

IV

The poetry of Euripides is presented as a poetry which has developed to reflect man's changing perception of truth. It is a poetry which is created from the reality of 'this world', which, as Browning says in the 'Essay on Shelley', is the starting-point and basis of all true poetry. It is clear that Euripides' poetry, both in content and expression, is in harmony with the forward movement of his era. This presentation of Euripides' poetry not only demonstrates Browning's keen awareness of the main criticisms of poetry in his age, but also illustrates his own aims to overcome those criticisms by a complete reassessment and renovation of poetry.

By a poetry created from the reality of his world Browning did not mean that a poet had to write slavishly about contemporary matters or events. In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' Arnold, writing of Shakespeare and his age, said that 'the poet lived in a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the

creative power' (CPW III, 262). Arnold did not suggest that Shakespeare wrote only of contemporary matters, obviously he did not, but he expressed, as Browning did, the intellectual and emotional ferment of the period. In 1848-49 Arnold wrote to Clough and accused Browning of 'a confused multitudinousness'. Such poets, he wrote, 'will not be patient neither understand that they must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness' (Letters to Clough, p. 97). At this early date, Arnold could not see the aim and direction of Browning's poetry. But his criticism in this letter supports his view that the Victorian current of ideas was too unsettled and various to be used directly by poets. Yet Browning's poetry accepts and makes use of this 'multitudinousness'. Browning did not intend to impose his 'Idea of the world' upon his readers, but to allow them to perceive the order in the seeming confusion for themselves.

Browning's objective poet in the 'Essay on Shelley' is to supply 'the fresh and living swathe', which, as I said earlier, suggests something as yet green and supple, a return to the raw material of poetry--a fresh examination of life itself. This freshness is not confined to the subject but is also expressed through the whole of the poetry. G. Brimley in Fraser's Magazine (1856) complained that Browning 'scrawls down the first rough hints that suggest themselves to him' (p. 105). C. Edmunds in the Eclectic Review (1849) describes Browning's 'versification' as having 'the facility of energy, not of smoothness' (p. 214). These criticisms are similar to Arnold's: Browning's poetry seems premature and unformed. But, as his letter to Ruskin shows, Browning was perfectly aware that he did not 'paint it all plain out'. The roughness or unsolved quality of his poetry was

deliberate and not the result of carelessness. The reasons for this quality can be traced to the way in which Browning wants his reader to perceive his subjects, and also to Browning's understanding of the main criticisms against poetry as an art-form of relevance to a practical and prosaic age. I shall examine the latter proposition first.

Earlier I suggested that there was a pervasive doubt as to whether poetry had any real value or function in modern times. The main force behind this doubt was the feeling that poetry was out of tune with modern life: that it was in effect an out-moded art-form locked in the past by the limitations of its medium of expression--language and metre. Macaulay felt that poetical language belonged to the past, modern language was mainly intellectual and philosophical (that is, abstract and discursive rather than concrete and descriptive). Carlyle and Peacock felt that metre too often became an irritating 'jingle', a baby's rattle. If this were true, that the medium of poetry itself was out-moded, then obviously poets could not deal with contemporary subjects: the language and form of poetry, by being of a past era, would distance and blur the subject rather than heighten and realize it to the reader.

In 'Goethe', Carlyle writes: "'if [the poet] would lead captive our whole being, not rest satisfied with a part of it, he must address us on interests that are, not that were ours; and in a dialect which finds a response, and not a contradiction, within our bosoms"' (Works XXVI, 251). From what Carlyle writes elsewhere one can assume that his criticism is that poetry all too often does not capture the intellect. Carlyle calls poetry 'musical thought' and a frequent and general criticism in the first half of the nineteenth century was that

contemporary poetry was lacking in thought. Carlyle's point in the quotation from 'Goethe' is that the poet must deal with thoughts which are relevant to his times, and must also write 'in a dialect which finds a response, and not a contradiction within our bosoms': the language of poetry must not alienate the reader from the thought expressed by being in an artificial or old-fashioned language.

In Aristophanes' Apology Euripides' art advances with the changes of his times and breaks with the old poetic traditions in subject-matter, form, and language. Browning, in a similar manner, completely reassesses his art-form. In a letter of 30 June 1887 to Henry G. Spaulding he rejects the sing-song or jingle of poetry which so irritated Carlyle:

All this will show that I have given much attention to music proper--I believe to the detriment of what people take for 'music' in poetry, when I had to consider that quality. For the first effect of apprehending real musicality was to make me abjure the sing-song which, in my early days, was taken for it.¹¹

I believe that what Browning means by 'music proper' is that the metre or rhyme of his poetry is not something added to the thought or subject of the poem, but something which is essential to the expression of the thought or subject. In Heroes, Carlyle writes of 'rhyme that had no inward necessity to be rhymed'. Browning's 'music proper' is a metre or rhyme which meets exactly the 'inward necessity' of a subject's expression. This is what George Lewes noted when he wrote of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day that, 'his style is swayed by the subject. It is a garment, not a mould.'

In the letter to Kenyon, Browning recognizes that by abjuring the sing-song of poetry he also moves away from what is generally understood by 'music' in poetry. As with the letter to Ruskin, Browning draws

attention to the gulf between what is generally understood by poetry and what he understands by it. In Aristophanes' Apology the crucial difference between Aristophanes and Euripides is that Euripides 'extended bounds' (1690), while Aristophanes' 'teaching' is 'accept the old, / Contest the strange!' (2649-50). Browning's central point is that poetry is falsely regarded as a fixed and stable form, made up of various elements--subject, metre, language--which are limited according to what is understood by poetical, and what is understood by poetical is clearly no more than an acceptance of the old and a contesting of the strange. Aristophanes says, 'in no case, venture boy-experiments! / Old wine's the wine: new poetry drinks raw' (955-56), and his audience advises him to 'stick to that standard, change were decadence!' (907).

What Browning understands by poetry may be gleaned from 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' (Jocoseria, 1883):

thou tried

And ripe experimenter! Three months more
Have ministered to growth of Song: that graft
Into thy sterile stock has found at core

Moisture, I warrant, hitherto unquaffed
By boughs, however florid, wanting sap
Of prose-experience which provides the draught

Which song-sprouts, wanting, wither: vain we tap
A youngling stem all green and immature:
Experience must secret the stuff, our hap

Will be to quench Man's thirst with, glad and sure
That fancy wells up through corrective fact:
Missing which test of truth, though flowers allure

The goodman's eye with promise, soon the pact
Is broken, and 'tis flowers,--mere words,--he finds
When things,--that's fruit,--he looked for. Well, once
cracked

The nut, how glad my tooth the kernel grinds!
Song may henceforth boast substance! Therefore, hail
Proser and poet, perfect in both kinds!

Browning's concept of poetry is of a new kind of poetry, a poetry which is able to meet the demands of man in his more advanced and developed state. This new poetry is superficially less beautiful and musical, but it is more satisfying and substantial. This section of 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' again assesses the situation of poetry in the age. The growth and popularity of the novel, with the 'sap of prose-experience', was superseding poetry, 'song-sprouts'. Browning puts this withering of poetry down to its lack of 'substance', its failure to satisfy the 'test of truth' through 'corrective fact'.

Arthur Hugh Clough said much the same thing in his 'Review of Some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold' (1853):

it is plain and patent enough, that people much prefer 'Vanity Fair' and 'Eleanore'. Why so? . . . is it, that to be widely popular . . . poetry should deal, more than at present it usually does, with the general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature. . . . [and] not content itself merely with talking of what may be better elsewhere, but seek also to deal with what is here? (pp. 356-57)

The poet in Browning's poem is a 'ripe experimenter', one who like himself, has matured in his art, and who grafts onto the 'sterile stock'. Browning's rejection of Romantic poetry is perhaps better regarded as a 'grafting' process. As I shall demonstrate later, Browning's interest in the Romantic poets is invariably to develop some aspect of their art to suit his own aims. Browning dismisses the 'flowers' of poetry. 'Flowers' suggests all that is conventionally understood by poetry--prettiness, delicacy, sweetness, and grace--but this Browning sees as reducing poetry to 'mere words', to a purely aesthetic pleasure in the poem as words on a page. Browning regards poetry as a contribution to life, as part of the living experience

itself. It is not simply decorative (flowers), but functional, it feeds man's need for a knowledge of truth (fruit).

Browning's metaphor, by which a plant is used to describe a concept of poetry, cannot but remind one of Coleridge.¹² M.H. Abrams criticizes Coleridge's theory by saying, 'if the growth of a plant seems inherently purposeful, it is a purpose without an alternative, fated in the seed, and evolving into its final form without the super-vention of consciousness' (Mirror and the Lamp, p. 173). But Browning is not describing the creation of a poem but the growth or development of poetry (this reflects the broader Victorian perspective discussed in Chapter One). In the Biographia Literaria Coleridge writes: 'For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language' (p. 179, Ch xv). Browning's point is that the blossom and fragrancy of poetry are worthless if they lack this sap of human experience.

The poet is a conscious agent, a gardener, who must minister to the 'growth of Song'. As in the 'Essay on Shelley', the essential requirement for poetic development is its contact with truth, 'Rock's the song-soil'. In the little poem from which this line is taken, Browning specifically rejects the notion of a spontaneous, effortless creation of poetry (the kind of writing Abrams referred to):

Touch him ne'er so lightly, into song he broke:
Soil so quick--receptive,--not one feather-seed,
Not one flower-dust fell but straight its fall awoke
Vitalizing virtue: song would song succeed
Sudden as spontaneous--prove a poet-soul!

Indeed?

Rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare:
Sun and dew their mildness, storm and frost their rage
Vainly both expend,--few flowers awaken there:
Quiet in its cleft broods--what the after age
Knows and names a pine, a nation's heritage.
(Dramatic Idyls. Second Series. 1880)

Once again it should be noted that the bond with truth is what promotes the true development of poetry, that which is a 'nation's heritage'. As in 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', 'flowers' are regarded as being of secondary importance. The prettiness of poetry is not the essence of the art.

Browning's theory of the development of poetry overcomes the main criticisms and doubts about poetry in the Victorian era. The jingle of metre imposed upon poetry, and the stilted quality of conventional poetic language, are discarded by Browning since they do not contribute to the life flow of poetry--its sap or truth, 'to quench Man's thirst with'. Browning calls this 'sap' 'prose-experience' and he ends this part of the poem by saying 'Therefore, hail / Proser and poet, perfect in both kinds!'

In the letter to John Kenyon (quoted earlier), Browning prefers dramatic to lyrical poetry because 'in these latter days' he feels 'forced to take the nearest way' to saying what he has to say and to 'try and get attended to'. What these remarks suggest is that Browning's language, and his frequent choice of the dramatic and narrative forms of poetry, were not personal idiosyncrasies of expression. G.K. Chesterton in his Robert Browning explained Browning's style by saying that, 'he likes to express himself in a particular manner. The manner is as natural to him as a man's physical voice.' He goes on, 'Browning is simply a great demagogue, with an impediment in his speech' (p. 156). This view obscures the conscious thought which Browning put into his poetry.

I have been arguing that Browning was acutely aware of the problems of poetry in his era, that he carefully assessed the criticism levelled against the art-form, and that he constantly experimented to solve these problems and to advance the development of poetry. From what has been

written above it is clear that Browning's concept of poetry was different to the general notion of what poetry was, and that he was aware of this difference. He seems to move poetry closer to prose to prevent a disharmony of sense and sound, and he chooses those forms which will provide him with the 'nearest way' of saying what must be said.

In a letter to Milsand he wrote: 'The vice I hate most in what little English literature I now see, is the inveterate avoidance of simplicity and straightforwardness. If a man has a specific thing to say, little or great, he will not say it, he says something else altogether in an alien tone to the real matter in hand.'¹³ This shows a sympathy with those critics who feel that the age demands direct emphatic speech. Carlyle in Heroes said that 'what we want to get at is the thought the man had . . . why should he twist it into jingle, if he could speak it out plainly?' (Works V, 90). Charles Kingsley in 'Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope' (1853), praised Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' and 'Bridge of Sighs' for having 'no taint of this new poetic diction into which we have now fallen' and for 'saying it in the shortest, the simplest, the calmest, the most finished words' (p. 466). Carlyle summed the situation up in his usual prophet-like tone by saying:

the Age itself, does it not, beyond most ages, demand and require clear speech; an Age incapable of being sung to, in any but a trivial manner, till these convulsive agonies and wild revolutionary overturnings readjust themselves? Intelligible word of command, not musical psalmody and fiddling, is possible in this fell storm of battle.¹⁴

Browning did recognize the necessity for poetry to emphasize its teaching qualities in such an age, and of the necessity of getting

'attended to', but Browning's concern is always with poetry as an art-form. For Browning poetry is not a mere loud-hailer through which, with some semblance of unity, the multifarious disciplines of thought could address the age. But with some of his poems, particularly the later ones, the difference between these two attitudes is not very clear. If Browning regards the essence of poetry to be 'prose-experience', and the 'flowers', or beauty and sweetness of poetry, to be dispensable attractions, what is it that for Browning distinguishes poetry from prose, or elevates it above the other arts?

I began this chapter by drawing attention to Browning's use of the word 'conception' rather than 'subject', and I suggested that he uses this word to imply something that cannot be reduced to a direct statement. In the section quoted from 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' Browning's distinction between his poetry of 'sap' and the poetry of 'flowers' is that his poetry is of 'things' while the other is of 'mere words'. The roughness of the new poetry described in 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' is the same 'unsolved' rough quality which was noticed and criticized in Browning's own poetry. Earlier I argued that the reasons for this quality can be traced to the way in which Browning wants his reader to perceive his subject, in fact it would be truer to say that it is directly related to the way in which Browning attempts to communicate his conception.

In the letter to Ruskin, Browning makes a distinction between prose and poetry. With prose the reader can expect the words on the page to tell him directly what the author wants to say. The words and language have understood meanings which the author uses to state his subject. If the prose author does not 'paint it all plain out' then Browning says that the reader may criticize him 'because [prose] is

the absolute representation of portions of truth, what chronicling is to history--but in asking for more ultimates [in poetry] you must accept less mediates.' The distinction which Browning is trying to make clear to Ruskin is the difference between a stated fact and a recreation of the thing itself, the difference between 'mere words' and 'things'.

In Bottinius' speech in The Ring and the Book, Browning illustrates this distinction by describing the work of a painter, (the passage also makes an excellent commentary upon Andrea del Sarto's work and explains much of the irony of 'faultless'). The painter is given a commission to paint 'Joseph, Mary and her Babe / A-journeying to Egypt' (IX, 26-27). He makes 'studies (styled by draughtsmen so) / From some assistant corpse of Jew or Turk' (31-32), 'ensuring due correctness' (41). He makes some fifty photographically realistic studies of characters who match his subjects (see lines 44-45), to ensure that the external appearances conform to man's knowledge of reality. But this is not art. When the artist is asked for the painting he does not 'fall to shuffling 'mid his sheets, / Fumbling for first this, then the other fact / Consigned to paper' (my emphasis, 75-77).

Rather your artist turns abrupt from these,
And preferably buries him and broods

On the inner spectrum, filtered through the eye,
His brain-deposit, bred of many a drop,
E pluribus unum: and the wiser he!

(86-87, 89-91)

The result is 'less distinct, part by part, but in the whole / Truer to the subject,--the main central truth' (99-100), 'Truth rare and real, not transcripts, fact and false' (107).¹⁵ This is obviously very close to Browning's meaning in the Ruskin letter in which he says that his

conception is conveyed by 'touches and bits of outlines' ('less distinct, part by part'), so as to communicate 'ultimates' ('the main central truth').

It is clear that Browning makes truth the ultimate end of art. The poet's conception is his vision of truth and the difference between Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto is that the one concerns himself with the truths of life, the other with the facts of life. Both are realistic painters, but Lippi's interest in 'this world' is 'to find its meaning', its truth behind the facts.

The question of why Browning cannot 'paint it all plain out' is not explicitly answered in the letter, but there are hints as to what prevents such a direct communication. Browning suggests that language cannot directly communicate 'the infinite', the artist's complete vision. Further on in the letter he says: 'the whole is all but a simultaneous feeling with me', while language is a successive medium. In reading prose one expects 'as few breaks to the eye as the North Crescent and South Crescent that go together so cleverly in many a suburb'. By this Browning means that with prose one reads with preconceived expectations which stem from the established patterns and meanings which language imposes upon the thing to be expressed. If this regularity of pattern and meaning is broken you 'stand poking your alpenstock into the holes and [demonstrate] that no foot could have stood there'. This difference between poetic language and prose is connected to what Browning understands by the function of poetry. 'Is the business of [poetry] to tell people what they know already, as they know it.' The poet aims to give the reader a new vision, and to do this his conception of his subject-matter, and his expression, must differ from what is generally known or expected of that subject.

At the close of The Ring and the Book Browning does explain in some detail why the artist or poet cannot paint it all plain out. To the question 'Why take the artistic way to prove so much?' (XII, 837), he replies by saying that if one tells a truth directly one may alienate and offend (cf. 'people hate to be taught', Letter to Ruskin), and also the 'truth, by when it reaches [the reader], looks false' (XII, 850), since it seems no more than 'human testimony', or opinion. The passage which follows, describing 'the glory and good of Art' (XII, 838), really deals with poetry since it is poetry which alone combines language, vision (through imagery and description), and music.¹⁶

Art may tell a truth
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
 So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall,--
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than ever the Andante dived,--
 So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.
 (XII, 855-63)

Notice again the differentiation between 'thing' and 'word', and the presence of ultimate 'truth' at the expense of the mere 'mediate word'. The key word in this passage is 'obliquely', and it is because art is an oblique communication that Browning escapes his own charge that 'human speech is naught' and 'human testimony false'.

I have already touched on the uneasiness and distrust with which poetic language was viewed. As early as 1690 John Locke in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding wrote:

But yet, if we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow, that all the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative Application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for

nothing else, but to insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat . . . [and] wholly to be avoided; and where Truth and Knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault.

(p. 251, Bk I, Ch xi)

The practical and earnest¹⁷ character of the Victorian age heightened the artificiality of poetical language. Locke's observations are echoed by Carlyle, usually with the addition of some specific reference to the times. In the late eighteenth century Bentham challenged the ability of all language, not just poetic language, to convey with any degree of purity, a thought or thing. He argued that moral, religious, or social values adhered to many words and so tainted their value as mediums of expression.

The Romantic poets were aware of these criticisms of their medium but they never really solved the problems. Wordsworth in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads claimed that, 'There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pain has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men' (Works, p. 736a). But if Wordsworth partially met Locke's objections, by adhering to 'a plainer and more emphatic language' (p. 735a), he did not meet Bentham's objections. Also by finding his 'plainer' language in 'humble and rustic life' (p. 734a), he paved the way for the attacks by Macaulay and Peacock on the inability of poetry to be part of the sophisticated urban world of modern times.

In Shelley's Poetic Thoughts (1981), Richard Cronin makes an interesting study of the Romantic poets' concern with 'Language: Words and Ideas' (as the opening section of his first chapter is called). He

notes various attempts by poets to create a new language 'free from the defects of ordinary English' (p. 7), and says, 'if we disregard the extraordinary manoeuvres of Cythna [in Shelley's Laon and Cythna] and of Blake, then the pursuit of a new language free from the inherited associations that enrich and obscure ordinary language must remain for the poet an impossible dream' (p. 7). The Victorians inherited the Romantic anxiety about the imperfections of language, but I believe that Browning is unique in the scale of his attempt to overcome these imperfections. The 'oblique' communication lies at the heart of Browning's whole concept of art.

In The Ring and the Book Browning writes: 'And language--ah, the gift of eloquence! / Language that goes as easy as a glove / O'er good and evil, smoothens both to one' (I, 1179-81).¹⁸ Browning suggests that language can be used as a screen to prevent the recognition of 'good and evil'. Shelley, and the Romantic poets in general, accept the limitations of language but get around the impossibility of communicating 'in the nakedness of false and true' (Shelley's 'Ode to Liberty', 239) by making the poet the centre of critical reference:¹⁹ poetry is true because the poet is true. Cronin observes that 'a Benthamite distrust of the fictitious and irrational in poetry. . . . encouraged a peculiarly schizoid notion of the status of the poet' (Shelley's Poetic Thoughts, p. 5).

The poet is placed in a similar position to the prophet: he cannot share his vision, he can only speak it, and an acceptance of the truth of his vision depends on whether one regards him as a true prophet. The reader cannot judge for himself whether the vision presented is 'good or evil' since he sees only the 'gloved' version, the vision in a covering of language. This means that, as J.S. Mill

said, 'all poetry is of the nature of soliloquy': it is something overheard and not something shared or experienced. In J.S. Mill's interpretation poetry becomes a subjective expression rather than a communication with relevance to the objective world, the world shared with the reader.

Browning's observation that, 'art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word', very clearly makes art a communication, and it is a communication which specifically avoids a personal direct statement through language with the charge of subjectivism which this could involve. Although the poet's vision is subjective, 'the glory and good of art' is that it can communicate this subjective truth in an objective form.

The parallels in thought between Browning and his contemporary Kierkegaard have been frequently observed, but Charles L. Rivers is exceptional in emphasizing their mutual interest in the balancing of subjective and objective tendencies. Rivers quotes a passage from Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript which bears remarkable similarities to Browning's poetic thought, and which illuminates that thought:

Wherever the subjective is of importance in knowledge, and where appropriation thus constitutes the crux of the matter, the process of communication is a work of art, and doubly reflected. . . .

Ordinary communication, like objective thinking in general, has no secrets; only a doubly reflected subjective thinking has them. . . . The fact that the knowledge in question does not lend itself to direct utterance, because its essential feature consists of the appropriation, makes it a secret for everyone who is not in the same way doubly reflected within himself. . . . Hence when anyone proposes to communicate such truth directly, he proves his stupidity; and if anyone else demands this of him, he too shows that he is stupid.²⁰

Like Browning, Kierkegaard emphasizes the necessity of the indirect communication of subjective truth or knowledge, and, again like Browning, he recognizes art as being just this medium of indirect communication.

The phrase 'doubly reflected' can be used to illuminate a letter which Browning wrote to E.B.B. on 14 June 1845:

the more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as 'inspiration', nothing more nor less. . . . 'Reflection' is exactly what it names itself--a re-presentation, in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one. (Kintner I, 95)

In an earlier letter of 13 January 1845, he wrote: 'I only make men & women speak--give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me' (Kintner I, 7). Kierkegaard's 'doubly reflected' aptly seems to describe Browning's 're-presentation' in 'scattered rays' or 'prismatic hues' of the 'pure white light' of truth which was originally reflected upon the poet.

Kierkegaard argues that it is the 'appropriation [which] constitutes the crux of the matter', that is, it is the personal process of apprehending which is important. A 'direct utterance' cannot give this experience of personal apprehension or 'appropriation'. Kierkegaard makes the reader an active agent.²¹ In Kierkegaard's view the reader must, in some degree, undertake the same process of discovery as the poet, if he does not, or cannot, the work of art seems 'a secret' (which, considering the many accusations of 'obscurity' and 'difficulty' levelled at Browning's poetry, is an interesting observation).

Browning's phrase, 'Do the thing shall breed the thought', confirms that Browning's preference for the dramatic form is no arbitrary personal

inclination but part of his attempt to overcome the limitations of language and subjective poetry. In a letter to E.B.B. of 10 August 1845 he makes the same distinction between prose and poetry as in his letter to Ruskin. Unlike the prose writer, Browning cannot communicate everything in language since he will not tell the reader what to think or feel. He says:

And what easy work these novelists have of it! a Dramatic poet has to make you love or admire his men and women,--they must do and say all that you are to see and hear--really do it in your face, say it in your ears, and it is wholly for you, in your power, to name, characterize and so praise or blame, what is so said and done . . . if you don't perceive of yourself, there is no standing by, for the Author, and telling you: but with these novelists, a scrape of the pen--out blurring of a phrase, and the miracle is achieved. (Kintner I, 150)

Browning rejects any direct didacticism and makes it clear that his poetry is deliberately designed to allow the reader to share the process of discovery and to find the significance of the whole for himself.

Michael Mason in 'The Importance of Sordello', says that, 'the most important constituent of this new unideal figure of the poet is his reliance on his audience; poetry is not the effusion of genius, but a dynamic co-operation of audience and poet; gone is the old notion of poetry as the overheard solitary utterance, still being expressed by Mill in 1833' (p. 148). In fact Browning shifts the entire orientation of poetic theory from the poet, with his poem as a direct subjective expression, to the poem itself as a subjective vision communicated indirectly in an objective form. In Browning's poetic theory there is no passive element: poet, poem, and audience together re-create the original 'inspiration' of the 'great light'.

V

Browning's poetic orientation away from the poet to the poem itself marks a rejection of Romantic poetic theory. The process of this rejection mirrors to some extent the general movement of Victorian poetics away from the Romantic tradition. The influence of the later Romantics, particularly Shelley, is evident in Browning's early poem, Pauline, and also in Paracelsus and Sordello. But these poems also show clear signs of a questioning of the Romantic tradition: the speaker-poet of Pauline and Sordello is self-conscious, and the heroes of these three early long poems seem at times to parody the Romantic hero. In these poems Browning explores and tests the Romantic idea of poetry to evolve his own notion of what poetry must be like in his own era.

To speak of a 'rejection' of Romantic poetry and theory is perhaps too strong: Browning would regard the process as a natural development from a subjective cycle of poetic history to an objective one. I have already mentioned in passing a few passages and ideas in the 'Essay on Shelley' which seem to echo the views of Shelley himself. In the 'Essay' Browning seems to regard himself as continuing the work which Shelley began--a working towards a perfect blend of subjective and objective poetry. Shelley is an obvious influence upon Browning's poetic thought, but Coleridge may also have influenced his thinking. Nevertheless it is the departure from this Romantic influence which is significant.

In the Biographia Literaria Coleridge divides the imagination into the primary and secondary imagination. 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as

a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.' The contrast between 'infinite' and 'finite' reminds one of the letter to Ruskin, and the difference between 'creation' and 'repetition' is similar to Browning's distinction between creation and resuscitation in The Ring and the Book. Coleridge continues: 'The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in the degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead' (p. 167, Ch xiii). The resemblance of this to Kierkegaard's ideas on 'doubly reflected' subjective truth, and to Browning's letter to E.B.B. of 14 June 1845 on 'a re-presentation', is obvious.

It should also be observed that Coleridge emphasizes 'the conscious will' involved in the use of the secondary imagination. In his letters Browning often states that his writing is achieved by an act of will and is not something which comes naturally and easily to him (as the original perception does). In the last sentence of the passage from Coleridge there is the same distinction as Browning makes in The Ring and the Book between live and dead truth. The truth communicated by poetry is 'essentially vital'. Coleridge may seem to anticipate important aspects of Browning's poetic theory, but there are important differences and additions which Browning makes to Coleridge's ideas.

The most important difference between Coleridge and Browning is the view which they take of the poet. In Coleridge's theory the poet is central: poetry remains the sole property of the poet, and his poem is

a kind of translation of this poetry into a form which will at least partially express the conception of his primary imagination. It is the poet's secondary imagination which 're-creates' the original conception, but Coleridge is aware that 'this process' is not always possible.

Coleridge's poetic theory must be seen as essentially expressive and subjective while Browning's poetry is mainly dramatic and objective. In Browning's poetic theory there is an attempt to efface the poet and to make the process of re-creation something which the reader achieves through the poem itself. Browning's most extensive study of the role of the poet occurs in his three early long poems, Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello. In these poems Browning seems to study and criticize the Romantic conception of the poet and his poetry. I shall return later to the passages quoted from Coleridge, but first it is necessary to consider what it is that Browning objected to in the Romantic figure of the poet-hero.

Pauline (1833) was written when Browning himself was somewhat self-consciously posing as a Romantic poet,²² and when he was still very much under the influence of Shelley and Byron. Although more usually associated with the 'Sun-treader', Shelley, Pauline also shows the influence of Byron--the unattainable love, the superhuman will struggling to be free, and the interest in death, are typical of Byron's works. Yet Pauline could never be mistaken for a work by Shelley or Byron since it continually questions the poetry and attitudes of the two poets. Michael Mason in 'The Importance of Sordello' notes a 'pervasive mental attitudinising, a kind of gentle dramatising, that runs through practically all Browning's passages of argument. An obscure passage like 2. 659-89, for example, can only be disentangled by sensing the alternating voices of "Poet" and "Man"; the reader

must be alert to the persuasive colouring in such signal-words as "forsooth", "no-time", "astounding"—a skill that is in fact the initiation to a reading of most of Browning's poetry' (p. 136). I believe that the same 'attitudinising' can be seen in the earlier Pauline, as well as in his later poetry.²³

The reader must attune his ear to Browning's pose, and to his questioning of that pose. For example, lines 593-600 of Pauline portray a Romantic hero in the mould of Byron's Manfred:

I cannot chain my soul, it will not rest
In its clay prison; this most narrow sphere--
It has strange powers, and feelings, and desires,
Which I cannot account for, nor explain,
But which I stifle not, being bound to trust
All feelings equally--to hear all sides:
Yet I cannot indulge them, and they live,
Referring to some state or life unknown²⁴

The unchained soul, with its strange powers, does not actually indulge in anything like Manfred's unholy acts. The section ends on 'yet I cannot indulge them'. The voice is singularly un-Byronic and significantly brings the Romantic dreamer back down to earth. The hero of Pauline is a hero in thought, not action. The 'Promethean spark' of Manfred, and of so many other Romantic heroes, in Browning's poetry becomes less the gift of two dimensional mythical beings and more representative of an aspect of all human beings. Browning portrays not a Byronic or Shelleyan hero but the human failure of a Byron or Shelley to be such a hero.

J.S. Mill in his private review of Pauline wrote: 'With considerable poetic powers, this writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being. I should think it a sincere confession, though of a most unloveable [sic]

state, if the "Pauline" were not evidently a mere phantom' (pp. 26-27). The last sentence and his suggestion later that much of the author's state is 'assumed', suggest that Mill half recognized that the poem was dramatic. He also noted that 'the psychological history of [the poet] is powerful and truthful, truth-like certainly' (p. 27), and the correction to 'truth-like' again shows that Mill partially recognized that the poem is a fictional dramatization of a kind of poetic aspiration which carries in itself its own failure, a failure which Browning emphasizes throughout the poem.

In Pauline there is a strong undercurrent of criticism: the Promethean spirit of the hero is mocked by what Mill recognized as his intense morbid self-consciousness.²⁵ Mill noticed, with amusement, that Pauline's lover does not so much love her as insist upon talking love to her. The poem is a mass of 'I' and 'my'. There is a clear emphasis on selfishness: 'My selfishness is satiated not, / It wears me like a flame' (601-02)

But I begin to know what thing hate is--
To sicken, and to quiver, and grow white,
And I myself have furnished its first prey.
All my sad weaknesses, this wavering will,
This selfishness, this still decaying frame . . .
(650-54)

The movement of the middle sections of this poem is of rising and falling, a continual see-saw motion which captures the essential sickness of the hero. He notes 'the chasm / 'Twixt what I am and all that I would be' (676-77). As Browning was to say throughout his poetry, the chasm between the finite and the infinite cannot be bridged by any act of will. Browning's early heroes, the hero of Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, do not celebrate a Romantic isolation and superiority, but rather come to recognize the importance of admitting

their finite condition and their essential bond to the rest of mankind. The unreality or untruthfulness of the Romantic hero was something Browning came to recognize in Shelley and Byron themselves.

In a letter to Miss Egerton Smith, 16 August 1873, Browning wrote:

I never said nor wrote a word against or about Byron's poetry or power in my life; but I did say, that, if he were in earnest and preferred being with the sea to associating with mankind, he would do well to stay with the sea's population; thereby simply taking him at his word, had it been honest--whereas it was altogether dishonest, seeing that nobody cared so much about the opinions of mankind, and deferred to them, as he who was thus posturing and pretending to despise them.
(my emphasis)²⁶

Browning saw the Romantic poet-hero as something of a pose and pretence. The pose and pretence became all the clearer in the debased Romantic poetry of the Spasmodics. Like Pauline and Sordello, Marston's Gerald (1842), Dobell's Balder (1853), Smith's A Life-Drama (1853), and Bigg's Night and Soul (1854), were all about the mind and life of a poet. However, Browning's poems are markedly more objective and critical, and it is my contention that Browning is consciously exploring and analyzing Romantic and contemporary poetic subjects and styles to evolve a truer idea of the role of the poet and poetry in the Victorian world.

Michael Mason in 'The Importance of Sordello' writes: 'Sordello's human weaknesses, his physical insignificance, his inarticulacy, are kept in the foreground. The concept of "Genius" is most persistently deflated in the person of the hero' (p. 148). He then goes on to make the observation quoted earlier about 'this new, unideal figure of the poet'. Mason puts what I called Browning's attempt to efface the poet into the context of early Victorian criticism:

This [the 'unideal poet'] is part of a major theme about the degree of presentation of the author's personality in art, and Browning is of course conventional in stressing the self-effacing, anonymous character of Eglamor's, the objective poet's, writing. Shakespeare was the orthodox instance of this. When Hazlitt analyses it ['On Genius and Common Sense', Table Talk (1821)] it has become a matter of moral anonymity, or loss of identity, on the part of the writer, and Browning rather departs from orthodoxy in making this kind of anonymity a mark also of the subjective poet, of Sordello, 'Beholding other creatures' attributes / And having none' (I, 718-719).
(pp. 148-49)

However, I am not sure that Browning's 'unideal poet' should be given this particular interpretation.

The idea of the 'moral anonymity' of the subjective poet is not strongly enough emphasized in the figure of Sordello to say that Browning is particularly pursuing this idea. Also the quotation, 'Beholding other creatures' attributes / And having none', is very like Keats's idea of the 'camelion Poet', which Keats makes the characteristic of all poets except 'the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone.' Keats writes that, 'the poetical Character . . . has no self--it is every thing and nothing--it has no character . . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet' (Letters, pp. 227-28, 27 October 1818). The moral anonymity of the poet in the sense that Michael Mason interprets it (as something, it would seem, much the same as Keats's 'camelion Poet') is not the main feature of Browning's new unideal poet.

Browning's new kind of poet, detached from his poem and relying on the co-operation of his audience, seems to me to be mainly a reaction against the Romantic conception of the poet as hero. In Carlyle's lectures one sees the Romantic and Victorian desire for an active hero--

'The Poet who could merely sit on a chair, and compose stanzas, would never make a stanza worth much. He could not sing the Heroic Warrior, unless he himself were at least a Heroic Warrior too' ('The Hero as Poet'). Sordello the poet also attempts to be the heroic warrior and fails. In Aristophanes' Apology Browning examines the issue from the distance of ancient Greece:

the multitude
Girded him [Euripides] ever 'All thine aim thine art?
The idle poet only? No regard
For civic duty, public service, here?
We drop our ballot-bean for Sophokles!
Not only could he write 'Antigoné',
But--since (we argued) whoso penned that piece
Might just as well conduct a squadron,--straight
Good-naturedly he took on him command,
Got laughed at, and went back to making plays,
Having allowed us our experiment
Respecting the fit use of faculty.'

(270-81)

Browning shows that the poet's 'fit use of faculty' is for poetry; his 'civic duty, public service' come from whatever effect his poetry may have and not from any direct act of the poet himself. Browning solves the problem of Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' by celebrating the distinction of 'House' and 'Shop' (Pacchiarotto, 1876). The crowd who jeer at Euripides 'Cold hater of his kind, / A sea-cave suits him, not the vulgar hearth!' (Aristophanes' Apology, 283-84), fail to see that he is both poet and man, and that he belongs both to the isolation of a 'sea-cave' and to a 'vulgar hearth'.²⁷

Browning's effacement of the poet is an attempt to focus all attention on the poem itself. In the letter to Ruskin it is significant that Browning distinguishes between poetry which operates on and serves humanity, and the poet who is responsible to God alone. This distinction seems to be quite deliberate. 'Do you think poetry was ever generally

understood--or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already . . . ?' 'A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable.' It might have been expected that Browning would have written 'Is it the business of the poet to tell people what they know already?' but Browning wants to make it clear that the poet's business is not with the people, and the poet does not tell the people anything--that is the business of his poetry. In fact, Browning ridicules the popular notion of the poet-hero--'foolish fables about Orpheus enchanting stocks and stones, poets standing up and being worshipped,--all nonsense and impossible dreaming.'

In Sordello Browning introduces the idea of 'the Makers--see' (III, 929).²⁸

For the worst of us, to say they so have seen;
For the better, what it was they saw; the best
Impart the gift of seeing to the rest
(III, 866-68)

The best poet is the one who can make the reader see for himself, giving him neither a plain narration nor a subjective interpretation of the subject-matter. The glory of art is its ability to 'tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought' (my emphasis). The work of art is objective, expressed here as an action, 'do the thing' (cf. 'Let this old woe step on the stage again! / Act itself o'er anew for men to judge', The Ring and the Book, I, 824-25), and the subjective interpretation comes not from the poet, but from the reader himself through the entire creation of the poem.

VI

Browning's effacement of the poet, and his emphasis on the poem as an objective oblique communication, involved an examination of the poetic use of language. This examination is one of Browning's most original contributions to Victorian poetic thought, and suggests a definition of poetic language which quite sharply distinguishes it from prose, but does not make it completely dependent upon metre or rhyme--the jingle of verse, which some critics felt alienated poetry from serious men in serious times.

The short passage on the 'Makers-see' comes after an exploration of the problems of the communication of the poet's conception. In Book II, *Sordello*, recognizing the limitations of ordinary language, tries to fashion a new language which will convey the poet's vision, the vision of what Coleridge called 'the primary imagination':

He left imagining, to try the stuff
That held the imaged thing, and, let it writhe
Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
To reach the light--his Language. How he sought
The cause, conceived a cure, and slow re-wrought
That Language,--welding words into the crude
Mass from the new speech round him, till a rude
Armour was hammered out

.

accordingly he took
An action with its actors, quite forsook
Himself to live in each, returned anon
With the result--a creature, and, by one
And one, proceeded leisurely to equip
Its limbs in harness of workmanship.

(II, 570-77, 581-86)

In the earlier discussion on the limitations of language I quoted from The Ring and the Book the lines, 'Language that goes as easy as a glove, / O'er good and evil'. In this passage from Sordello, language

is again presented as a covering which obscures 'the imaged thing'.

Sordello's 'perceptions whole' completely reject his new language.

Piece after piece that armour broke away
 Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
 As language: thought may take perception's place
 But hardly co-exist in any case,
 Being its mere presentment--of the whole
 By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
 By the successive and the many.
 (II, 588-95)

I have quoted at length from this section of Book II because it is the fullest discussion of communication and language to be found in Browning's works, and explains much of what he was attempting to do in his poetry. There are several points which I shall examine in detail, and which will help to tie together the main points of my argument.

This concern with communication and the problems of language is integrally related to the kind of subject-matter chosen by Browning. Immediately before the passages quoted, Sordello says to himself:

'These lays of yours, in brief--
 Cannot men bear, now, something better?--fly
 A pitch beyond this unreal pageantry
 Of essences? the period sure has ceased
 For such: present us with ourselves, at least.'
 (II, 562-66)

This closely resembles what Browning says in 'Old Pictures in Florence':

To cries of 'Greek Art and what more wish you?'--
 Replied, 'To become now self-acquainters,
 And paint man man, whatever the issue!'
 (146-48)

In both passages Browning presents a development in art, a change in the subject-matter of art from representations of imaginary ideals to representations of man as he actually is.

In 'Old Pictures in Florence' this new subject-matter clearly involves the study of man's soul. The artist's aim is 'To bring the invisible full into play!' (151). As in Sordello, this new subject-matter demands a new form of expression, 'rough-hewn, nowise polished' (126). Browning repeatedly stated that his subject-matter was man's soul. In 1863 he described Sordello as 'the incidents in the development of a soul', and went on to say, 'little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so', (Dedication to J. Milsand). In his 'Parleying with Charles Avison' he described a process of artistic creation very like Sordello's. The 'work' with the 'invisible' worker is the dramatic poem and poet ('accordingly he took / An action with its actors, quite forsook / Himself to live in each', Sordello II, 581-83). The bridge which the artist constructs is the communication which will 'bear the conception' from poet to reader (Letter to Ruskin).

We see a work: the worker works behind,
 Invisible himself. Suppose his act
 Be to o'erarch a gulf: he digs, transports,
 Shapes and, through enginery--all sizes, sorts,
 Lays stone by stone until a floor compact
 Proves our bridged causeway. So works Mind--by stress
 Of faculty, with loose facts, more or less,
 Builds up our solid knowledge: all the same,
 Underneath rolls what Mind may hide not tame,
 An element which works beyond our guess,
 Soul, the unsounded sea.

(VII)

This passage explains why 'perceptions whole' 'reject so pure a work of thought / As language'. The poet's aim is 'To match and mate / Feeling with knowledge,--make as manifest / Soul's work as Mind's work' ('Avison', VII). 'Perceptions whole' form a vision which is of 'feeling [and] knowledge',²⁹ and while language can communicate thought it is not so effective in communicating feeling. In Fifine at the Fair the speaker says that, 'Thought hankers after speech, while no speech may

evince / Feeling like music' (1566-67). The reference to music is important and I shall return to this later.

The lines from Sordello 'thought may take perceptions place / But hardly co-exist in any case, / Being its mere presentment--of the whole / By part, the simultaneous and the sole / By the successive and the many' (II, 591-95), become clearer when put into the context of Browning's own views on communication. What Browning says here is that the poet can translate his perception into language but that what the reader then has is no longer 'perceptions whole' but merely 'thought'. The thought expressed in language cannot 'co-exist' with 'perceptions whole' because language breaks 'the simultaneous and the sole' into 'parts'. Language, with its set patterns and meanings, imposes a structure upon what is to be communicated.

In the passage quoted from 'Charles Avison', Browning describes language as a bridge laid 'stone by stone': it is something solid and firm but also something isolated from the 'unsounded sea' of soul which rolls beneath. In Sordello the crowd 'painfully . . . tacks / Thought to thought (cf. 'stone by stone'), which Sordello, needing such, / Has rent perception into: its to clutch / And reconstruct--his office to diffuse, / Destroy' (my emphasis, II, 596-600). This can be compared to 'Charles Avison': 'What's known once is known ever: Arts arrange, / Dissociate, re-distribute, interchange / Part with part' (VIII). In 'Charles Avison' truth is broken up and re-arranged in order to be communicable and so once again appreciated by mankind. In Sordello, the poet's perception is similarly broken up and re-arranged to be communicable. In the passages quoted earlier from Coleridge, the secondary imagination 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create' (my emphasis). The Sordello passage makes it clear that

while the poet undertakes this breaking up process, it is the reader who must re-create.

It would appear that Browning accepts that poetry cannot express 'perceptions whole'. Language, the medium of poetry, must be read successively, line by line. But while Browning accepts the inevitable imperfections of language, he does not abandon his attempt to strive towards an ultimate communication of his conception or perception. This is why Browning emphasizes in the Ruskin letter that he does not make his conception out by his language.

It is this attempt to communicate 'perceptions whole', to make the reader see both the intellectual and emotional or spiritual aspects of a subject, which lies at the heart of Browning's explanation of his art to Ruskin, and which also lies at the heart of most of the misunderstandings between Browning and his readers. Oscar Wilde's witty remark that 'Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose',³⁰ becomes absurd when it is realized that Wilde takes no cognizance of Browning's idea of what poetry is. In the letter to Ruskin, Browning specifically says that his poetry is unlike prose, and that it is this very fact that it is so unlike prose which makes it difficult.

Wilde's criticism reveals that he regards poetry as what Browning calls 'flowers', as something pretty and pleasing, but not as something capable of dealing with the serious 'sap of prose-experience'. Browning's distinction between poetry and prose is not marked by a difference in subject-matter or function, but by a difference in expression and in the quality of the experience which the reader receives.

Browning regards prose as 'the absolute representation of portions of truth'. I understand this as meaning that in prose the reader receives

a complete description or portrayal of one view of truth. It is 'absolute' because it is a finished representation to which the reader does not contribute in order to complete the vision. But while it is 'absolute' in this sense of expression, it is limited in that it can reveal only 'portions of truth', those portions which deal with thought and hence can be fully expressed through language. Browning sees this as the joint benefit and penalty of prose: by relying completely on language, it has more mediates but less ultimates than poetry.

'All poetry [is] a putting the infinite within the finite.' Poetry, which concerns itself with the infinite, must use other means of expression 'within' language in order to overcome the limitations of its finiteness. This is why in the Ruskin letter he stresses the broken disjointed quality of his poetic language. Unlike prose, poetry does not depend entirely on language to convey the conception to the reader, rather it may deliberately break the reader's prosaic, over-thoughtful way of reading.

Although Browning's work as a whole reveals constant experimentation, it also reveals the pursuit of a coherent poetic theory. In the poems which discuss art or poetry, implicitly or explicitly, scattered throughout his long career, there is a remarkable continuity of thought. The continuity is all the more striking because Browning often uses the same imagery to express these thoughts. Browning uses two main analogies when discussing communication. Language is seen in terms of a covering or clothing (for example, Paracelsus II, 433-36, Sordello II, 569-73, The Ring and the Book I, 1180-81). In 'Charles Avison' (VII) language is again a kind of solid opaque covering, a stone bridge.³¹ In contrast, poetic communication is often described in terms of peaks, stars, or points separated by spaces and gaps which the reader must leap across by

his own effort. The important difference is that poetry is not a solid opaque structure of language, but rather an open transparent medium which allows the reader to see the depth of soul³² normally obscured by language.

Although a few of the quotations which follow are familiar, they are necessary to reveal the continuity of Browning's theory, and to draw together the argument. In Paracelsus, Aprile would express his subject

in language as the need should be,
 Now poured at once forth in a burning flow,
 Now piled up in a grand array of words.
 This done, to perfect and consummate all.
 Even as a luminous haze links star to star,
 I would supply all chasms with music, breathing
 Mysterious motions of the soul, no way
 To be defined save in strange melodies.
 (my emphasis, II, 472-79)

This relates to the Preface of Paracelsus (1835), where Browning says that 'were my scenes stars it must be [the reader's] co-operating fancy which, supplying all chasms, shall connect the scattered lights into one constellation' (my emphasis). The image of 'chasms' occurs again in the Ruskin letter, where Browning argues that the reader should trip 'from ledge to ledge of my "glaciers"'. In the letter he says that poetry has 'less mediate'. In The Ring and the Book the passage Book XII, lines 855-60, describes art as breeding the thought 'missing the mediate word' (my emphasis). The last line of this passage, 'So, note by note, bring music from your mind', relates back to the lines quoted above from Paracelsus, 'I would supply all chasms with music.' This music, as Browning makes clear in the passage from The Ring and the Book, is 'music from [the reader's mind]', (just as the thought is bred by the poem in the reader's mind, XII, 866). In 'Charles Avison'(VI)

music is the art which best expresses feeling or 'Soul, the unsounded sea' (VII).

For Browning then, poetry is an indirect communication. The poet uses language in a way which while it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates' his conception, allows the reader to re-create that conception: the reader connects 'the scattered lights into one constellation'. Words are used to create images and sounds which will evoke thoughts and emotions from the reader's mind. While language must be accepted as the medium of poetry, Browning makes it clear that poetry ranges beyond the solid constructions of grammar (see 'Of Pacchiarotto', 554-58).

In Browning's view ordinary language, or prose, is a solid structure or covering into which thoughts are 'translated'. Poetic language 'ought to create--or re-animate something'. The importance of this distinction to Browning's concept of poetry can be inferred from the unusually harsh tone of his letter to Mrs Fitzgerald, in which he scorns her method of 'understanding' poetry:

you imagine that with more learning you would 'understand' more about my poetry--as if you would find it already written--only waiting to be translated into English and my verses: whereas I should consider such a use of learning to be absolutely contemptible: for poetry, if it is to deserve the name, ought to create--or re-animate something.
(Learned Lady, p. 157, 17 March 1883)

Although in this letter Browning is writing about 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', what he says is obviously very close to his explanation of his poetic art in The Ring and the Book--'creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps' (I, 719). In this explanation, poetry is an 'art of arts' (746) which combines 'insight' and 'outsight' (747), and which again pushes language to its limits ('Push lines out to the limits', 756) to create 'What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard, / Mistakenly felt' (758-59).

In other words, poetry creates an actual experience.

One of the most frequent criticisms made of Browning's poetry was obscurity (a brief examination of Browning: The Critical Heritage will provide many examples). Yet from the passages quoted above it would seem that at times obscurity is part of Browning's poetic art ('a luminous haze links star to star', 'mistily seen, murmuringly heard, / Mistakenly felt'). E.B.B. makes important observations on Browning's obscurity in some of her letters. On 25 May 1845 she writes: 'a good deal of what is called obscurity in you, arises from a habit of very subtle association . . . the effect of which is to throw together on the same level & in the same light, things of likeness & unlikeness---till the reader grows confused' (Kintner I, 78). In a letter of 9 September 1845 she comments on Sordello that 'it wants drawing together & fortifying in the connections & associations' (Kintner I, 186-87), and on 21 December 1845 she again writes about Sordello:

I think that the principle of association is too subtle in movement throughout it--so that while you are going straight forward you go at the same time round & round, until the progress involved in the motion is lost sight of by the looker on. (Kintner I, 342)

Browning implies that it is the necessary obscurity of his language ('the haze') which allows the reader to go beyond language and grasp the whole of the conception (link 'star to star'). E.B.B. feels that this is too difficult for the reader at times, that the gaps between 'the connections & associations' are too great.

Sordello is notorious for its obscurity but because it is in many ways an extreme, it is the clearest example of what Browning was attempting to achieve. In the 'Essay on Shelley', the perfect poem, the 'perfect shield', is presented as the simultaneous expression of the subjective and objective poetic vision. In Aristophanes' Apology the

ideal poet writes

complex Poetry,
Uniting each god-grace, including both [comedy and tragedy]:
Which, operant for body as for soul,
Mastersalike the laughter and the tears,
Supreme in lowliest earth, sublimest sky
(1473-77)

Complex poetry expresses and ministers to the 'perfect manhood' of 'intellect' and 'sense', 'Head' and 'soul',--'man's double nature'.

The ideal poet appears again at the end of the poem:

While, as to your imaginary Third
Who, stationed (by mechanics past my guess)
So as to take in every side at once,
And not successively,--may reconcile
The High and Low in tragi-comic verse,--
He shall be hailed superior to us both.
(5140-45, my emphasis)

Again there is the idea of simultaneous expression to convey a complete view of a subject and not just one side. It is significant that this ideal poet is 'imaginary': even with The Ring and the Book Browning does not achieve the expression of 'every side at once', / And not successively.' But the desire to achieve this perfection remains a constant aim in Browning's poetry, and once recognized, Sordello in particular becomes a fascinating example of this aim.

E.B.B.'s criticisms of Sordello draw attention not to unintentional faults but to deliberate experiments in aspects of poetic communication which Browning modified and practised throughout his writing career. The 'very subtle association' which throws 'together on the same level . . . things of likeness & unlikeness', and which controls the movement of the poem 'so that while you are going straight forward you go at the same time [my emphasis] round & round', is Browning's most daring attempt

at simultaneous expression.

Michael Mason's 'The Importance of Sordello' supports much of my general argument in this chapter with specific reference to Sordello.

For example, he writes:

One of the great causes of obscurity in the poem is its subtle subversion of correct syntax. . . . Time and again the really functional elements of sense appear in a syntactically deceptively subordinate position. There is a heavy reliance on a kind of para-grammar of interjections and parenthesis. (p. 135)³³

This is part of Browning's effort to overcome the limitations of language, and Mason's remarks put me in mind of Sterne's Tristram Shandy in which the author similarly uses a para-grammar to express the inexpressible. In Book VI, Chapter xxxiii, Sterne writes: 'When a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forward to keep all tight together in the reader's fancy' (cf. E.B.B.'s criticism that the movement of Sordello goes 'round & round'). He also speaks of the 'breaks and gaps in it' and of 'the stars' which he hangs up in 'the darkest passages'. The stars are asterisks, so that Sterne, like Browning, finds language inadequate and relies on his reader's co-operating fancy (see Tristram Shandy, Bk VI, Ch xxxviii). Not only is there a curious similarity between Sterne's para-grammar and Browning's, but also a similarity of imagery to express the inadequacy of language--'stars', 'breaks and gaps'.

What is more important, however, is that Tristram Shandy also demonstrates the difference between prose and Browning's understanding of poetry. Sterne only succeeds, and it is a very limited success, in breaking through the finite barrier of language and tapping the reader's own imagination by writing a comic anti-novel. Tristram Shandy's para-

grammar is used either to relinquish all power of expression and leave the reader free to imagine what he will, or to show the writer's complete inability to control language. In other words, prose cannot be used for serious subjects in such a way without satirizing the medium itself.

On the other hand, in Browning's Sordello, the distortions of normal syntax are used to increase the poet's powers of expression and to demonstrate his mastery over language. Michael Mason notes that,

on a small scale a license with syntax permits such 'simultaneous' descriptive effects as accompanies Taurello's pacing: 'As show its corpse the world's end some split tomb' (V, 935), or the keeping of two topics in play at once which is exhibited in the interleaving of Eglamor's funeral and the analysis of some of Sordello's early attitudes (II, 192-95).
(p. 135)

In effect, as George Lewes observed about Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, Browning's mode of expression is used to project his vision of his subject: it is not the ready-made sack of language which is used to hold any and every subject, 'and, let it writhe / Never so fiercely, scarce [allows] a tithe / To reach the light'. C. Edmunds in the Eclectic Review (1849) wrote that Browning's 'mastery over language, and of an essentially poetical language--condensed, and imaginatively breathing life, is complete' (p. 213). Browning's mastery of expression is clearly in poetry, not prose.

In Sordello the subject is not imparted to the reader but experienced by the reader, and to some extent, the poem itself is something which the reader shares in the creation of. W.D. Shaw, in The Dialectical Temper, notes that in Sordello the narrator 'revives the oral modes of primary epic':

even the multiplication of dashes and the random punctuation invite an oral approach to the poem. In the absence of detailed punctuation that might facilitate the merely visual response of silent reading, Sordello, like the primary epic, must often be read aloud to be fully understood. (p. 26)

The narrative, then, is more immediate, and if, as Shaw suggests, Browning intended the reader to read it aloud, then the reader's participation in the creation of the poem is increased.

Michael Mason has drawn attention to the 'simultaneity' of the poem: the attempt to prevent the thought by thought, line by line, reading which Browning associates with prose. In Book III Browning discusses his poem and implies that the reader is indeed watching and participating in the creation of a new poetry. The use of 'we' and 'ours' increases this close personal association of poet and reader.

we watch construct,
In short, an engine: with a finished one,
What it can do, is all,--nought, how 't is done.
But this of ours yet in probation
(III, 840-43)

The 'engine' is generally taken to mean man. Charles L. Rivers interprets the machine as the personality--'The primary function of the individual is to evolve a personality capable of twin revealment, a machine for fitting infinite to finite' (Robert Browning's Theory of the Poet, p. 130). This follows Arthur J. Whyte's notes to his edition of Sordello in which the machine is 'human character' (p. 135).

While this interpretation is perfectly acceptable, I feel that Browning is also referring to his own poem, and is directly addressing the reader. The context of the passage deals with poets and poetry, and particularly concerns the 'Metaphysic Poet', 'your Moses' (829, 826), both of which phrases Browning applied to himself elsewhere.³⁴ The

discussion is about the 'office' of the poet, and the question widens to 'what do we here?' (837). The question is both general (what does mankind here?) and specific (what does the 'Metaphysic Poet' here with his poem?). 'The scope of the whole engine's to be proved; / We die: which means to say, the whole's removed', 'To be set up anew elsewhere' (849-50, 852). While this obviously relates to Browning's ideas on man's development, it also refers to the development of poetry and the recognition of his own poem. It may be compared to Keats's The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream, 'Whether the dream now purpos'd to rehearse / Be poet's or fanatic's will be known / When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.' The writing of the poem and the reading of the poem become almost a shared experience. As in Tristram Shandy, the frequent time-shifts, which blur the age of Sordello's story with the time of Browning's story of the writing of Sordello, and the many asides to the reader, make the reader feel that he is involved in the problems of creating Sordello rather than in the reading of a finished poem.

Sordello is an attempt to make the reader see, in as direct a manner as possible, what Browning himself saw in Sordello's life and poetry, and what he himself was attempting to do with poetry. It is a difficult and confused work because Browning had not yet found a way of bridging the gap between what the poet saw in his subject and what the reader can see. The opening section of Book I shows Browning's indecision about whether to choose the dramatic or narrative mode. He says he would prefer the dramatic mode (I, 11-17), but settles for narrative poetry since he had 'best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem / The wearer's quality' and stand with 'pointing-pole in hand' (28-29, 30). The poetry of the 'Makers-see', which Browning tentatively attempts in Sordello, dispenses with the bridge of logical thought to impart to the reader the

gift of seeing. It conveys a truth without the necessity of intermediate steps to prove the truth. But the fear which Browning expresses in the opening of his poem is that the reader may see but not understand.³⁵ If the poet withdraws himself from the poem how can he retain his control of the reader's response?

In the letter to Ruskin, Browning has come to terms with this problem: the poet cannot be perfect, 'I look on my own shortcomings too sorrowfully, try to remedy them too earnestly'. 'Is the jump too much there? The whole is but a simultaneous feeling with me.' The gap between ordinary fact and 'fact unseen' ('Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse', VI) must be bridged indirectly by the reader's own powers of perception, which, although limited, are expanded and guided by the poetry. The reader must grasp the significance of what Browning presents and so expand the abstract, the 'touches and bits of outlines', to something like the poet's own vision. In the 'Essay on Shelley' Browning wrote that 'the spirit of a like endowment with his [the poet's] own, . . . by means of his abstract, can pass forthwith to the reality it was made from', and:

we learn only what he [the poet] intended we should learn by that particular exercise of his power,--the fact itself, --which with its infinite significances, each of us receives for the first time as a creation, and is hereafter left to deal with, as in proportion to his own intelligence he best may. (p. 64).

These remarks belong to the section on the 'objective' poet.

The last quotation is particularly important: the aim of poet is to let the reader see the fact or reality itself. It is because it is seen afresh, from the poet's vision in a creation, or work of art, that its 'infinite significances' may be grasped, but Browning admits that

the objective poet then leaves the reader to make what he can of these significances. This explains the difficulty of Browning's poetry and also the reasons why critics so often fail to agree on an interpretation of Browning's poems. Browning's poetry was not written for the reader to search out Browning's opinion, but rather to offer him the means with which to 'pass to the reality it was made from', 'with its infinite significances'. Once the reader has achieved this vision, he must exercise his own judgment and intelligence so that the poem becomes a personal experience of some reality of life. The poem becomes both objective and subjective: it is a thing which breeds the thought in each reader.

Browning's subject-matter, and his treatment of that subject-matter, invariably provokes the reader to active thought and judgment. The problematic, the ambiguous, 'the dangerous edge of things. / The honest thief, the tender murderer' ('Bishop Blougram's Apology', 395-96)--these are the subjects which interest Browning. Blougram says 'one step aside, / They're classed and done with' (400-01). Browning's Blougram is neither 'fool or knave', 'there's a thousand diamond weights between' (406): the 'infinite significances' of the subject which Gigadibs and reader would normally never notice. Browning does not 'class' his subjects: they are not 'done with', but, on the contrary, really only begin with the reader's apprehension and judgment. As I said, the poem itself becomes an experience of life: 'Life's business being just the terrible choice' (The Ring and the Book X, 1237).

VII

This chapter is headed 'Browning's Poetic Theory: Conception and Communication' because I wanted to emphasize that Browning's subject-matter and treatment are integrally related. I have touched lightly on Browning's choice of subjects because this is the main concern of the chapters which follow. As in the section on the 'Essay on Shelley', I have stressed Browning's general theory of development since this lies at the heart of Browning's poetic theory as a whole, and affects both his subject-matter and treatment. Again the full meaning of these remarks will become clearer as the thesis progresses, but I think it is already obvious that Browning's subject-matter is chosen particularly to reveal 'fact unseen'. Truth, and especially the truth of human life, is Browning's subject-matter, but, in Browning's view, man has now reached such a stage of development that his art must penetrate '[to] show through rind to pith / Each object' ('Parleying with Christopher Smart', VII), to show 'how the soul empowers / The body to reveal its every mood' ('Parleying with Francis Furini', X).

Those who argue that Browning elevates intuition over reason miss the whole point of Browning's theory which is that art strives towards the perfection of complete truth. Again and again, Browning envisages perfect poetry or art as the reconciliation and simultaneous presentation of opposites. In Aristophanes' Apology the ideal poetry, as yet 'imaginary', is

complex Poetry,
Uniting each god-grace, including both:
Which, operant for body as for soul,
Masters alike the laughter and the tears,
Supreme in lowliest earth, sublimest sky.
Who dares disjoin these,--whether he ignores
Body or soul, whichever half destroys,--
Maims the else perfect manhood

(1473-80)

The material, (body or the common fact of appearance), is never ignored.

In The Ring and the Book for example, Browning takes a great deal of trouble to ascertain that his facts are correct. Reason or thought is likewise never ignored, but it is not the whole of man or of truth. If Browning's bias is towards the 'fact unseen' and 'soul', it is because these have become the main interest of man in his developed state. The task of the poet is to make the reader see what remains invisible or clouded to his ordinary vision. Browning's poetry, then, is clearly not an objective description, nor a subjective interpretation, but rather a fusion of both which will allow the reader to see the poet's complete conception of his subject, 'insight' and 'outsight' (The Ring and the Book I, 747).

It is an appreciation of the complexity of Browning's thought on the art of communicating both subjective and objective vision, thought and sense, body and soul, which has been the main concern of this chapter. I have particularly tried to suggest that Browning's choice of subject, and what often seems his obscure and difficult style, are a conscious part of his poetic theory and are not idiosyncratic whims. Moreover, his poetic theory clearly attempts to overcome the main criticisms and problems facing poetry in his time--especially the staleness of poetic language and subject-matter, the subjectivity of poetic truth, and the irrelevance of poetry to modern life.

Far from being an outmoded form of expression, or mere entertainment, Browning regards poetry as the 'highest outcome' of philosophy³⁶ and the form of expression which comes closest to communicating a complete vision and comprehension of truth. It is the entire art of poetry which permits this full communication; language alone would limit the

reader's perception of the subject to a mere 'tithe'. The point is made succinctly in 'Transcendentalism': while Boehme writes 'naked thoughts' about roses, John of Halberstadt 'vents a brace of rhymes, / And in there breaks the sudden rose herself' (39-40). The vision becomes the reader's own, and the burden of proof, which is attached to any direct statement, does not apply. The poet does not seek to convince the reader since he is not asking him to believe anything he may say. The judgment is the reader's own, even the Pope's judgment in The Ring and the Book is said to be 'the ultimate / Judgment save yours' (my emphasis, I, 1220-21).

In the passage quoted earlier from the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning says that finally he leaves the reader to make of the poem what he can. In a letter to John Ruskin, 1 February 1856, Browning wrote that 'with your letter came one from Carlyle . . . he looks to what suits his own sight in what I show. So God makes him, you & me.'³⁷ The last remark shows the same tolerance and acceptance which one finds in the 'Essay on Shelley'. The poem is an experience: it is a controlled experience, but the 'infinite significances' of the poet's subject depend on the reader for the completeness of their apprehension. The orientation of Browning's poetic theory is to the poem, not the poet.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹ For example, Isobel Armstrong opens her essay, 'The Brownings', by saying that 'the Brownings were eccentrics, both in their art and in their personal lives'. She goes on to say that 'this "riddance" of English life in 1846 [their move to Italy] had by far the greatest effect on the poetry of Robert Browning' (p. 293). She says that Browning is 'the real eccentric' and stresses his 'idiosyncratic freedom and independence' (p. 294). Philip Drew opens The Poetry of Browning by similarly stressing Browning's 'uniqueness', his 'radical difference from all the other poets of the nineteenth century' (p. 3). The danger is that such an emphasis on Browning's eccentricity divorces him from the main movement of Victorian poetry and poetic theory. It is just Browning's intense involvement with, and contribution to, this main movement that I intend to study.

² Edward Berdoe, Browning's Message to his Time, p. 194.

³ This closely resembles Aubrey De Vere's remarks in the Edinburgh Review (1849): "Originality does not invent, so much as detect, the new; revealing to us what lay about our feet, but lay there unobserved" (p. 365). De Vere's article resembles Browning's poetic thoughts on several points.

⁴ The novelty of this idea can be gauged from some of the protests made against Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day. For example:
Our complaint against Mr. Browning is--that while dealing with the highest themes of imagination and indicating his competency to treat them, he has recklessly impaired the dignity of his purpose by the vehicle chosen for its development. The form of doggerel [sic]--carried to excess by strange and offensive oddities of versification--is not that in which the mysteries of faith, doubt, and eternity can be treated.

(Unsigned review in the Athenaeum, 6 April 1850, pp. 370-71, reprinted in Browning: The Critical Heritage, ed. Litzinger and Smalley, pp. 138-39 (p. 138).)

⁵ This is, I think, what Browning means, but his metaphor is not entirely appropriate since wine, unlike poetry, does itself change. It is not simply that most wines taste sweeter to those who drink them in later years, but that they really do become sweeter.

⁶ Cf. 'Andrea del Sarto': 'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for' (97-98). Andrea, while recognizing the cardinal points of Browning's theory, lacks the will to practise any of them.

⁷ Lectures on Art (1870), Lecture III. Works XX, 73.

⁸ Lectures on Art, Lecture IV. Works XX, 95.

9 The Elements of Drawing, Pt II, 258. Works XV, 227.

10 Quoted by Eleanor Cook, Browning's Lyrics, p. xv.

11 Quoted by Drew, Poetry of Browning, p. 66 (footnote).

12 It is not only Browning's plant metaphor which reminds one of Coleridge but also his distinction between 'words' and 'things'. In a letter of 22 September 1800 to William Godwin, Coleridge wrote: 'I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too" (p. 626). In the same letter, Coleridge seems to anticipate Sordello's desire to communicate 'perceptions whole'. 'If there be anything yet undreamt of in our philosophy; if it be, or if it be possible, that thought can impel thought out of the visual limit of a man's own skull & heart' (p. 624). Collected Letters I, 624-26.

13 Quoted by Eleanor Cook, Browning's Lyrics, p. xiii. The letter has no date.

14 The Life of John Sterling (1851), III, i. Works XI, 195-96.

15 Cf. 'Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these--/Not absolutely in a portion, yet/Evolvible from the whole' (my emphasis, The Ring and the Book, X, 228-30), and also the phrase in the letter to Ruskin: prose is 'the absolute representation of portions of truth' (my emphasis).

16 It could be said that opera also employs language, vision, and music, but it does not completely combine these elements: they remain distinct parts of the whole. It is quite possible, for example, to enjoy the music of an opera and yet find the plot tedious. Poetry is unique in that the thought, vision, and music of a poem are produced simultaneously in the reader's mind. Arnold in his 'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoön' (circa 1864-5) praises poetry as the highest art.

For, ah! so much he [the poet] has to do;
Be painter and musician too!
The aspect of the moment show,
The feeling of the moment know!
(129-32)

He must especially

life's movement tell!
The thread which binds it all in one,
And not its separate parts alone.
(140-42)

Arnold makes two points about poetry's superiority over the other arts. First, it combines vision and feeling (Browning would add 'thought'), and secondly, it can capture the movement of life and yet reveal the unity of the whole movement. It is this second aspect which makes poetry supreme. In his 'Parleying with Charles Avison', Browning regards music as the highest art except in this respect: it cannot arrest movement or 'give momentary feeling permanence' (VIII). Similarly painting and sculpture are flawed in that they cannot 'life's movement tell'; they can only depict a moment.

17 See Geoffrey Tillotson, A View of Victorian Literature, Ch I, 'Earnestness'.

18 Cf. Shelley's 'Ode to Liberty':

Oh, that the words which make the thoughts obscure
 From which they spring, as clouds of glimmering dew
 From a white lake blot Heaven's blue portraiture,
 Were stripped of their thin masks and various hue
 And frowns and smiles and splendours not their own,
 Till in the nakedness of false and true
 They stood before their Lord, each to receive its due!
 (234-40)

19 E.g. Coleridge in his Biographia Literaria: 'What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other' (p. 173, Ch xiv).

20 Quoted in an expanded form by C.L. Rivers in Robert Browning's Theory of the Poet, 1833-1841, pp. 16-17.

21 This idea of the reader as an active agent in the creation of the poem is something which C. Edmunds recognized in Browning's own poetry:

Our poet always presupposes an intelligent and thoughtful reader; and herein lies the primary source of difficulty. Almost always, he not only leaves unexplained much that a less bold or abstract poet would explain; but also much in the conception of character, to be comprehensively imagined out; or seen at once --taken for granted, as the ground-work for the after-realization of the poet's creative working.
 (p. 208)

22 See Mrs Bridell-Fox's description of the young Browning in DeVane, Handbook, p. 15; also Irvine and Honan, The Book, the Ring and the Poet, chapters II and III.

23 This dialectical tendency has been studied in several works and receives its fullest treatment in W.D. Shaw's The Dialectical Temper. Shaw characterizes the dialectical temper by 'its habit of imitating and rejecting different attitudes and beliefs, which forces the reader to discover the astonishing (and often disturbing) life of the ideas' (p. 3). This can be applied to Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, with particular emphasis on the attitudes and beliefs of the Romantics.

24 Cf. these lines to Byron's Manfred: 'I could not tame my nature down' (III, i, 116), and 'the Promethean spark,/The lightning of my being, is as bright,/Pervading, and far darting as your own/ And shall not yield to yours, though cooped in clay!' (I, i, 154-57).

25 My suggestion that Browning was both writing in the Romantic tradition and criticizing that tradition is supported by W.O. Raymond's argument in 'Browning's Conception of Love as Represented in

Paracelsus' (in The Infinite Moment, ed. Raymond). Raymond says that the heroes of Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello, 'represent the incarnation of romantic traditions and impulses, which are an elemental part of Browning's own genius', but in those three poems Browning

has probed with an unsparing hand the cancer of romantic egoism, with its passionate, unbridled impulses of limitless self-assertion, its scorn of all relative accomplishment, and its tendency to seek refuge in vague abstractions. It is a disdain for the finite, a refusal to stoop to the necessary conditions of life, a negation of the actual rather than the ideal side of man's nature, that constitute the fallacy and account for the imperfect insight of these gifted though tempest-tossed men of genius.

(p. 163)

Michael Mason in 'The Importance of Sordello' also observes that while Book I seems to set forth a familiar Romantic topic of long poems--the growth of a poet--it is in fact a critical examination of the Romantic poet. Mason notes how Sordello's 'overweening solipsism' is often undercut by the narrator's asides or by descriptions which reveal the true situation opposing Sordello's version (p. 129).

26 Quoted by Drew, Poetry of Browning, p. 48 (footnote 2).

27 Cf. this argument to what Henry James writes of Browning in William Wetmore Story and His Friends:

It is impossible not to believe that he had arrived somehow, for his own deep purposes, at the enjoyment of a double identity. It was not easy to meet him and know him without some resort to the supposition that he had literally mastered the secret of dividing the personal consciousness into a pair of independent compartments. . . . The poet and the 'member of society' were, in a word, dissociated in him as they can rarely elsewhere have been.

(II, 88-89)

28 There may be a connection of 'Makers-see' with Browning's lines in The Ring and the Book:

'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?'

(I, 455-56)

To make-see and to make-believe (if one reads the latter apart from its usual meaning of 'white lies') are very similar, and it is possible that Browning is deliberately playing with words--'Make-believe' and 'the white lies it sounds like', that is, sounds like the more usual meaning of 'make-believe', but is in fact something quite different. Browning the poet does deal in making the reader see or believe.

29 The necessity of uniting feeling and knowledge receives its

fullest treatment in Paracelsus in the characters of Aprile and Paracelsus (love or feeling, and intellect or knowledge). Also the typical modes of expression of these characters are lyric for Aprile and dramatic speech for Paracelsus. Again this shows Browning's concern for the union of subjective and objective tendencies.

30 The Critic as Artist, pt I, in Literary Criticism of Oscar Wilde, p. 202.

31 Browning actually uses the word 'mind', but he clearly means by this the intellect or thinking aspect of man, and, as Sordello shows, Browning regards language as the medium of thought.

32 Browning obligingly explains what he means by 'soul' in 'Parleying with Charles Avison' (VI), but, true to his theory, 'soul' cannot be expressed by language and he resorts to 'an illustrative image' (VII).

33 E.g. I, 389-427. The syntax and punctuation make the reader experience the winding corridors. It is impossible to regard this as mere description: the whole scene has the quality of a cinematic panning-shot.

34 E.g. 'my muddy metaphysical poetry' (Kintner I, 75), and the two 'Pisgah-sight' poems in Pacchiarotto.

35 In the 'Parleying with Christopher Smart', Browning describes the miracle of Smart's perfect poetry as a Lazarus-like vision:

Was it that when, by rarest chance, there fell
Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
Naked, and whoso saw for once could tell
Us others of her majesty and might
In large, her loveliness infinite
In little,--straight you used the power where-with
Sense, penetrating as through rind to pith
Each object, thoroughly revealed might view
And comprehend the old things made new,
So that while eye saw, soul to tongue could trust
Thing which struck word out, and once more adjust
Real vision to right language.

(my emphasis, VII)

This is Browning's ideal poetry which can make the reader both see and understand. It is a poetry of perfect vision and perfect communication. The passage is full of echoes of Browning's other writings on art and poetry. The idea of the infinite expressed in the finite, again expressed here, explains Browning's particular interest in the idea of the Incarnation. For Browning perfect poetry would be the incarnation of Truth in words, and in this sense God is the 'perfect poet' through the Incarnation, since Christ is 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John, 14: 6) and also 'the Word' (John, 1: 1).

36 In a letter of 1889 to William Knight, Browning says:
I am delighted to hear that there is a likelihood
of your establishing yourself in Glasgow, and in

illustrating Literature as happily as you have expounded Philosophy at St. Andrews. It is certainly the right order of things: Philosophy first, and Poetry, which is its highest outcome, afterward--and much harm has been done by reversing the natural process.

(Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robert Browning, p. 409.)

37 Quoted by Eleanor Cook, Browning's Lyrics, pp. 201-02.

PART TWO

THE SUBJECT-MATTER DEBATE

Introduction

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT OF PART TWO

Now the subject to be treated, is the 'subject' of Painter and Sculptor; what ought to be the nature of that 'subject', how far that subject may be drawn from past or present time with advantage, how far the subject may tend to confer upon its embodiment the title, 'High Art', how far the subject may tend to confer upon its embodiment the title 'Low Art'; what is 'High Art', what is 'Low Art'?

John L. Tupper, 'The Subject in Art', The Germ (1850), 11-18 (p. 11)

The first part of this study dealt with the general position of Victorian poetry and poetic theory. This second part will concentrate more exclusively on the debate about poetic subject-matter, and in particular on Robert Browning's contribution to the debate. Yet although this part of the study is concerned mainly with subject-matter it cannot be forgotten that this was a focal point for much larger issues. In 'L'Année Terrible' (1872), Swinburne wrote that, 'the question whether past or present afford the highest matter for high poetry and offer the noblest reward to the noble workman has been as loudly and as long debated, but is really less debatable on any rational ground than the question of the end and aim of art' (A Study of Victor Hugo, Works XIII, 246). In fact, as I attempted to show in the first part of this thesis, the subject-matter debate was a debate about 'the end and aim of art'.

In 'The Palace of Art', Tennyson asks the question 'Where should the artist's soul ultimately reside--in an isolated "palace of art" or with the mass of mankind?' The situation of the soul in 'The Palace of

'Art' is similar to the proud lady's in 'Lady Clara Vere de Vere'. In both poems the dominant theme is the supreme importance of living humanity. In 'The Palace of Art' the soul in its palace is described as:

mouldering with the dull earth's mouldering sod,
Inwraught tenfold in slothful shame,
Lay there exiled from eternal God,
Lost to her place and name.

The description is not unlike that of Clara Vere de Vere:

You pine among your halls and towers:
The languid light of your proud eyes
Is wearied of the rolling hours.

The final verse of the poem contains the lines:

Clara, Clara Vere de Vere,
If time be heavy on your hands,
Are there no beggars at your gate,
Nor any poor about your lands?
Oh! teach the orphan-boy to read,
Or teach the orphan-girl to sew,
Pray Heaven for a human heart.

Similarly in 'The Palace of Art' one assumes that the soul, leaving her palace and going down to the vale, will seek to serve mankind.

Swinburne in 'L'Année Terrible' declared that, 'If it be not true that the only absolute duty of art is the duty she owes to herself, then must art be dependent on the alien conditions of subject and of aim; whereas she is dependent on herself alone' (Works XIII, 244). This was exactly the question: where did the 'absolute duty of art' lie?

In Chapter One I stressed the importance of the 'Zeitgeist' to an understanding of Victorian poetics. The question of 'the end and aim' of poetry took on a special relevance in the Victorian period because of the practical and materialistic character of Victorian society and civilisation. Poetry was invariably regarded in an historical and

cultural context, and criticism centred on the human, social, or moral, reference of a poem. As Matthew Arnold observed in his Preface (1853), 'the present age makes great claims upon us: we owe it service' (CPW I, 13). Artists were forced to consider the kind of service which they owed the age.

Tennyson ends 'The Palace of Art' with the stanza:

'Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built:
Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt.'

Before considering the implications of this stanza it is useful to compare it with some other statements about art in the context of the age. In 1877 Edith Simcox wrote: 'We are not . . . callous to the emotions vibrating in the voice of poetic passion, only while men and women are starving round us in brutal misery . . . the poem [seems] far away from half our life. . . . We are called away from the peaceful life of intellectual perception' (Natural Law: an Essay in Ethics, p. 331). Thomas Carlyle spoke of 'putting away . . . for a season, the poetry of the world'.¹ What these statements imply is that the conditions and needs of Victorian society require active practical service, and 'the peaceful life of intellectual perception' is inappropriate to, and remote from, these urgent social requirements. Tennyson is not making quite the same suggestion as Edith Simcox or Thomas Carlyle; what Tennyson rejects is aestheticism.

The earlier position of the soul in the poem seems very like the aestheticism of Whistler, expressed much later in the century.

My soul would live alone unto herself
In her high palace there.
And 'while the world runs round and round', I said,
'Reign thou apart, a quiet king'.

In his 'Ten O'Clock' lecture (1885), Whistler wrote:

The master stands in no relation to the moment at which he occurs--a monument of isolation--hinting at sadness--having no part in the progress of his fellow men. (p. 20)

But by the conclusion of the poem Tennyson implies that the artist must turn from an aesthetic art, an art purely for the pleasure of the private individual, which neither serves nor concerns itself with the real world, to an art which is more immediately involved with the life of common humanity.²

To some extent, however, Tennyson seems to agree with Carlyle that some aspects of art must be set aside for the time being. The idea of keeping the 'palace towers' intact for a future age can be compared to what Arnold writes in his conclusion to the Preface (1853). He says, 'if it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live' to produce great art,

let us transmit to [the future] the practice of poetry . . . under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect.

Both Tennyson and Arnold are concerned with the preservation of the 'structure' of high art, and this suggests a major issue of the subject-matter debate--to be relevant to the 'circumstances amidst which [men now] live' must art abandon some of those qualities which are traditionally regarded as constituting great art?

In an article called 'The Subject in Art' (1850), which I shall discuss at greater length later, John L. Tupper discusses 'the propriety of choosing the subject from past or present'. He takes it for granted

that it is accepted that the function of art is its 'practically humanizing tendency', and he argues that art can best carry out this function by being 'more directly conversant with the things, incidents, and influences which surround and constitute the living world'. The most important point in the essay is that art must 'assume this attitude' (of being more directly conversant with matters of contemporary life), even at the risk of 'jeopardizing her specific existence'. What precisely Tupper means by this phrase I shall attempt to unravel later, but in a broad sense he seems to be considering the same matter as Tennyson and Arnold--the preservation or destruction of 'the palace of art'. Tupper regards the absolute duty of art as being the duty she owes to humanity, he consequently makes the value of art dependent on subject and aim. Swinburne rejects this view completely. In his opinion, a work of art must be 'judged by the laws of the special art to whose laws it is amenable. If the rules and conditions of that art be not observed, or if the work done be not great and perfect enough to rank among its triumphs, the poem, picture, statue, is a failure irredeemable and inexcusable by any show or any proof of high purpose and noble meaning' ('L'Année Terrible', Works XIII, 242).

The subject-matter debate very clearly involves what I called in Chapter One an entire reassessment of what is meant by poetry. In what has been discussed above it is important to see that this is a debate, a debate which in 1872 Swinburne acknowledges as having been 'loudly' and 'long' in existence. My point is that one must be careful to recognize that a poet or critic may take up an extreme position in order to contest what he regards as the main contention of the opposite argument. More than this, he may change the whole emphasis of his

criticism according to any new direction which the debate may take. This, I feel, is a particularly important point to remember in Arnold's criticism, but it is also an important general consideration to make whenever one comes across what appears to be a contradiction or inconsistency in a writer's body of work.

The central aim of the Victorian artists and critics is to establish the proper relation of art to their age. The difficulty was to find a means of achieving both 'a work of positive excellence', according to 'the laws of the special art to whose laws it is amenable' (Swinburne), and a work whose relevance to 'the living world', whose 'practically humanizing tendency' (John L. Tupper), would be readily acknowledged. The problems of reconciling these two aims are well illustrated by what Lionel Stevenson calls 'the inherent ambiguity of the Pre-Raphaelite movement'. 'Though one basic tenet was the depiction of contemporary subjects with saturated detail, the other was decorative design, using color and composition in a picture, meter and melody in a poem, to produce an aesthetically delightful effect' (The Pre-Raphaelite Poets, p. 6). This inherent ambiguity in the Pre-Raphaelite movement is an inherent ambiguity in Victorian poetics as a whole.

The problems of reconciling 'the laws of the special art' with a pragmatic theory of poetry, whose concern was often narrowly localised to a specific time and country (that is, Victorian Britain), tended to concentrate interest upon the subject or content of a work of art. In Modern Painters (1843-60), Ruskin declared that, 'He is the greatest artist who has embodied, in the sum of his works, the greatest number of the greatest ideas'.³ In discussing the art of painting Ruskin uses expressions which apply more readily to literature. 'In painting, it

is altogether impossible to say beforehand what details a great painter may make poetical by use of them to excite noble emotions.'⁴ 'Both painting and speaking are methods of expression. Poetry is the employment of either for the noblest purposes.'⁵ In attempting to establish the value of art in a practical materialistic age, critics tended to blur or lose sight of what Swinburne called 'the laws of [each] special art'.

While Modern Painters is supposed to be a guide to 'the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True',⁶ Ruskin continually denies that 'the true criticism of art . . . can consist in the mere application of rules'.⁷ In other words, there can be no absolute guide to what makes great art or what is great art. Ruskin writes:

the difference between great and mean art lies, not in definable methods of handling, or styles of representation, or choice of subjects, but wholly in the nobleness of the end to which the effort of the painter is addressed. . . . He is great if . . . he has laid open noble truths, or aroused noble emotions. . . . And it does not matter whether he seek for his subjects among peasants or nobles, among the heroic or the simple, in courts or in fields, so only that he behold all things with a thirst for beauty, and a hatred of meanness and vice. There are, indeed, certain methods of representation which are usually adopted by the most active minds, and certain characters of subject usually delighted in by the noblest hearts; but it is quite possible, quite easy, to adopt the manner of painting without possessing the nobility of spirit; while, on the other hand, it is altogether impossible to foretell on what strange objects the strength of a great man will sometimes be concentrated, or by what strange means he will sometimes express himself. So that the true criticism of art never can consist in the mere application of rules: it can be just only when it is founded on quick sympathy with the innumerable instincts and changeful efforts of human nature, chastened and guided by unchanging love of all things that God has created to be beautiful, and pronounced to be good.
(my emphasis)⁸

Ruskin's definition of great art is singularly unhelpful to any painter

seeking guidance as to what constitutes a great painting. Ruskin lets everything rest on the end result: a painting is great if it affects the audience by its noble truths, and arouses in the audience noble emotions. How this greatness is achieved seems to depend entirely upon the greatness of the artist.

I have quoted this passage at length because in two important respects it is extremely typical of Victorian criticism in general. First, Ruskin begins with a precise concrete question: the difference between great and mean art, but ends by letting the answer rest in the mysteries of human and divine nature. In Victorian criticism, the crucial questions about art are frequently asked but seldom answered in any but the vaguest and woolliest of ways. Secondly, the only practical guides as to what constitutes great art are previous examples of works which have been recognized and accepted as being great. In the section which I have emphasized, Ruskin suggests that great art may reveal common factors as to choice of subject-matter and manner of execution. This is indeed how Ruskin, and most of the Victorian critics and artists, formulate their conception of greatness in art--by studying examples of earlier masterpieces.

Ruskin's Stones of Venice (1851-53) are touchstones, guides to values threatened or absent in Victorian Britain.⁹ Carlyle uses the medieval period for much the same purpose in Past and Present (1843). Arnold speaks of 'using the poetry of the great classics as a sort of touchstone' ('The Study of Poetry', 1880, CPW IX, 187), and in the Preface (1853), he writes: 'in the sincere endeavour to learn and practise, amid the bewildering confusion of our times, what is sound and true in poetical art, I seemed to myself to find the only sure guidance, the only solid footing, among the ancients' (CPW I, 14).

Arnold, like Ruskin, cannot determine what exactly is 'sound and true' art in his age. As he makes clear in the sentences which follow this quotation, the demands of the age are too contradictory and uncertain 'as to what is really to be aimed at'. As with so many others in the period, Arnold seeks 'guidance' from a past culture.

Humphry House writes that,

the medieval world attracted [the artists] not from a mere love of archaic patterns and forms or by a nostalgia for more colourful ways of life (though these things entered into it) but because medieval art did not betray any such cleavage between daily visible fact and accepted truth and values They attempted, by exploring the possibilities of allegory and symbolism, to restore a harmony they thought modern life had lost.

(All In Due Time, p. 155)

This is also essentially true of the attraction of the classical world-- at these periods art was in complete harmony with the times and held a central place in society, expressing and sustaining the spiritual and intellectual life of the people. What Humphry House observes is that these model cultures provided the artist with what was so obviously deficient in his own age.

First, the 'patterns and forms' of medieval or classical art provided positive guidance about the technical aspects of the specific art-form. A glance through Arnold's literary criticism reveals the immense importance of this. When, at the conclusion to the Preface (1853), he speaks of 'the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws', he is referring to boundaries and laws defined by the classical authors. Victorian poetic theory is almost completely silent on matters relating to the actual 'practice of poetry': the boundaries of poetry, the laws of poetry are never discussed in any detail.

Secondly, although Humphry House rather plays this down, 'a nostalgia for more colourful ways of life' reflects a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the quality of life in the Victorian period. The 'nostalgia' is not a simple desire for an escapist subject-matter but rather a profound sense of an absence of beauty, spiritual nobility, and order in the age (see the quotation from Ruskin, p. 204). As John L. Tupper observed: 'It is obvious . . . that all which we have of the past is stamped with an impress of mental assimilation: an impress it has received from the mind of the author who has garnered it up, and disposed it in that form and order which ensure it acceptable with posterity' ('The Subject in Art, II', p. 119). The past, unlike the present, no longer seems to be a time of intellectual anarchy; its movement has been arrested, identified, and ordered.

Thirdly, as I observed earlier, the classical and medieval periods seemed to be eras in which the artist was an integral member of society, and art an essential part of life. The absence of any 'cleavage between daily visible fact and accepted truth and values' meant that the artist could invest the objects of everyday reality with meanings and significances suggestive of a spiritual or divine order. There was a common centre of belief which allowed the artist to communicate on a deeper level than objective reality, and yet which prevented this communication from being purely subjective. Some of the qualities of these past cultures could be partially recaptured by choosing a subject-matter drawn from these periods, and this was the great attraction of classical and medieval subject-matter. But if these qualities could be recaptured in an art of modern times, could these qualities have any relevance, or any real relation, to modern times?

In an article, 'Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of

Dante Gabriel Rossetti' (1964), Harold L. Weatherby observes that 'the difficulty that beset the Victorian art for art's sake movement [was] the failure of content, the failure of meaning, the failure of traditional symbols to function properly when they were cut loose from the belief in spiritual realities which originally produced them' (p. 11). Weatherby's point, as applied to my argument above, is that a classical or medieval subject cannot communicate the same belief or meaning as it originally had. In other words, a poem or painting with a classical or medieval subject could perhaps recapture certain qualities of classical or medieval art, but such a subject in itself could not make these qualities have the same relevance to life as they had in classical or medieval times.

In 'Winckelmann' Walter Pater raises a different point. He asks: 'Can the blitheness and universality of the antique ideal be communicated to artistic productions, which shall contain the fulness of the experience of the modern world?' (The Renaissance, p. 230). It is not only that modern art cannot recapture 'the blitheness and universality of the antique ideal' and give this art the same relation to reality which it had in ancient times, it is also that a work of art modelled on 'the antique ideal' cannot contain 'the experience of the modern world'. Another point, as contemporary criticisms of Arnold's subject-matter reveal, is that if poetry was to be, in theory, the support and expression of man's spiritual and emotional nature, then it had not only to serve this end, but also to make it clear to its audience that it did serve this end. Poetry with a classical subject-matter may embody the order, discipline, and beauty absent from, and yet necessary to, modern life, but if it is not recognized as relevant to modern life then its effect will not be a practical contribution to life, but

rather an aesthetic enjoyment detached from life.

'Art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake' (p. 239). This is what Pater wrote in his famous or notorious conclusion to The Renaissance in 1873. It is necessary not to read this in isolation: it is part of the whole Victorian debate about poetry, and states, in sharper terms, matters which were debated from the 1830s onwards. Twenty years earlier, Arnold wrote in his Preface: '[Poets who have studied the ancients] do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity; their business is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling' (CPW I, 13). This does not seem markedly different from Pater's interpretation of art. Both men are stressing the point that the first requisite of art is to give pleasure.

Pater, however, uses the phrase 'the highest quality', and Arnold uses the phrase 'the highest pleasure'--the kind of pleasure which art offers must be carefully considered before one concludes that Arnold and Pater agree with Bentham's opinion that poetry is a harmless amusement of a similar status and value to 'push-pin'. In Arnold's view the pleasure which is to be found in poetry affects the whole life and character of the reader.¹⁰ While Pater does not believe that poetry has any effect on life beyond those actual moments in which it is experienced and enjoyed, he does regard those moments as the finest and highest in life. From either viewpoint art is not regarded as something trivial.

The points which I wish to draw from these quotations are crucial

to an understanding of the subject-matter debate and of Victorian poetics in general. First, the vast bulk of material involved in any study of Victorian literature necessitates generalization and a somewhat crude affixing of labels. I have argued that the general character of Victorian poetic theory is pragmatic, in that it concerns itself mainly with the effect on the reader. It is tempting to divide the period into neat sections and to point to a late century 'aestheticism' as a reaction to a mid-century 'pragmatism' or 'didacticism'.¹¹ This 'aestheticism' eventually drifts into the 'decadence' of the 1890s. However, a central point of my argument is that throughout the Victorian period one can see a duality of concern: a concern for the work of art as a work of art, and a concern for the work of art as the artist's contribution to mankind, and in particular as his contribution to the human society of his age. The poet's choice of a subject from the past or the present, and how he handles his subject, reflect the way in which he balances these concerns.

Another important point which these quotations bring to the fore is the obsession with time. From what perspective does one view a work of art? In what context should it be judged? Where does art stand in relation to Victorian progress and civilisation, and ultimately to human progress in general? These questions obviously deeply troubled Matthew Arnold. In 'Joubert' (1864) he writes:

There are the famous men of genius in literature,--the Homers, Dantes, Shakespeares: of them we need not speak; their praise is for ever and ever. Then there are the famous men of ability in literature: their praise is in their own generation. And what makes this difference? The work of the two orders of men is at the bottom the same,--a criticism of life. . . . But the criticism which the men of genius pass upon human life is permanently acceptable to mankind; the criticism which the men of ability pass upon human life is transitorily acceptable. . . . the acceptableness of Shakespeare's criticism depends upon its inherent truth: the acceptableness of Scribe's upon its suiting itself, by its subject-matter, ideas, mode of treatment, to the taste of the generation that hears it. (CPW III, 209)

Again the subject-matter debate reflects the way in which the poet thought about these questions.

The significance of Browning's theory of human and poetic development becomes much clearer, in terms of a poetic theory, when it is placed in the context of these debates. Browning's emphasis on the essential bond between the progress of man and the progress of poetry is unique, and heals the division between the artist's duty to humanity and his duty to his art. The problem of maintaining the quality of art, of adhering to the rules and boundaries of each art-form, is also perceived and dealt with by Browning. Traditions, and earlier models, which other artists regarded as touchstones of values, are subjected to the test of relevance to the needs of the specific work of art being created. Browning makes this clear in his Preface to Paracelsus (1835).

This recognition that a reassessment of poetry, a reassessment of its aims, values, and functions, also meant a reassessment of what actually constituted a poem, was extremely rare in Victorian poetics. Swinburne might say 'no form is obsolete, no subject out of date, if the right man be there to rehandle it', but he does not say what he means by 'rehandle'. Very few poets or critics considered whether the discordance between poetry and modern life was not a question of subject-matter, but rather of the definition or understanding of what poetry itself is. Rigid ideas of proper poetic language, of style, of genre, of tone, and of how these should be related to certain kinds of subjects, clashed with the way in which these subjects were regarded in the real world.

While Victorian critics avoided any clear statements about these technical aspects of poetry, they were quick to point out any deviations from the established patterns set by the great poets of the past. In the previous chapter I illustrated this point by drawing attention to the

criticisms of Browning's Christmas-Eve and Easter Day. Browning most consciously mixed genres (for example, note the titles of these volumes--Dramatic Lyrics, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, Dramatic Idyls), redefined genres (The Ring and the Book is an obvious redefinition of epic but Clyde deL. Ryals also regards the Parleyings as an epic),¹² and invented completely new poetic forms (how would one classify Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, for example?).

In breaking through the limitations of genre Browning is not unique; Tennyson also mixed genres and experimented with various forms. But Browning is unique in making this experimentation part of a conscious redefining of poetry. Perhaps the rarest attribute of Browning is that he evolved for himself both a theory of poetics (the relationships between poet, poem, audience, and universe), and a theory of the actual art-form of the poem (the relationships between language, metre, rhythm, subject-matter, genre, etc.), and integrated these theories into a united concept of poetry which is both aesthetic and pragmatic. The poem is an actual experience in itself, but it is also an experience which can be applied to life.

Browning stands at the centre of the subject-matter debate because he seems deliberately to use his choice of subject-matter to focus attention on the greater issues behind the debate. G.K. Chesterton seized this as the crux of The Ring and the Book:

The essence of The Ring and the Book is that it is the great epic of the nineteenth century. . . . The supreme difference that divides The Ring and the Book from all the great poems of similar length and largeness of design is precisely the fact that all these are about affairs commonly called important, and The Ring and the Book is about an affair commonly called contemptible.

(Robert Browning, p. 163)

The whole question of what is a poetic subject, or what is a great or noble subject, is brought to the fore again and again by Browning. It is the theme which lies behind the short poem, 'A Light Woman', and behind the two long late poems, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album, both of which are studiously based on fact and are distinctly contemporary in setting. By drawing attention to his peculiar, and sometimes apparently perverse, choice of subject, Browning demonstrates that the subject itself is unimportant, and that the success of a poem depends upon the poet's conception and communication--on the poet's ability to embody his vision and understanding of a subject in the poem as a whole, and so to communicate this vision and understanding to his reader, who, once he has been 'made to see', must judge and evaluate for himself both the poem and the experiences which the poem involves.

Although the quotation from John L. Tupper, which opens this part of the study, concentrates on whether the poet chooses subjects from the past or the present, I have tried to show that this frequent concern with the period setting of a subject reflects other more important considerations. Therefore, although the headings of the chapters which follow would seem to indicate that the central concern of these chapters will be whether or not the poet chooses his subject-matter from Victorian life, the issues examined will in fact range rather more widely.

In Chapter Three, 'The Unpoetical Age: The Subject-Matter of Escape', the discussion will centre on Matthew Arnold's poetic theory. Like Browning, Arnold realises that a complete reassessment of poetry is required, that the Romantic tradition is, to use Arnold's word, 'inadequate' to the requirements of the Victorian age. Arnold believes that an adequate poetry can best be produced by working within the 'boundaries and wholesome regulative laws' of the classical tradition. Unlike Browning, Arnold

assumes that 'what is sound and true in poetical art' is a stable, unchanging quality which remains independent of man's development and growth. This belief allows him to escape those unpoetical elements of the age by advocating a subject-matter and mode of treatment in the classical tradition.

Essentially, Browning's main quarrel with Arnold is his quarrel with all poets who seriously offer modern man a poetry based on earlier traditions: such a poetry fails to acknowledge the development of mankind, and hence also fails to contribute to the development of poetry. The argument of the chapter has been greatly simplified, but even so it is obvious that an important issue between Browning and Arnold is the different ways in which they regard poetry as an art-form. Arnold greatly respects the boundaries and laws of classical poetry: Browning only recognizes those boundaries and laws which are helpful to the creation of his particular poem.

'The Boundaries of Poetry: The Subject-Matter of Reality' explores the question of whether Browning 'extended bounds', as he says of Euripides in Aristophanes' Apology, or whether, as for example Alfred Austin argues, he goes so far beyond the conventional limits of poetry that he is, in the final analysis, not a poet but something else.

Again the question of whether or not to choose subjects from contemporary reality is not the central concern of this chapter. As with the previous chapter, the real question is what is understood by poetry, what is proper to poetry? I shall argue that Browning seldom forgets that he is writing poetry, but that the qualities of this poetry may not be those which the reader is accustomed to expect. What Browning does is to question arbitrary or traditional boundaries of what is poetical and to create poems which in themselves explore and define

poetry.

In my conclusion to the study I shall return to my interpretation of Browning's poetic theory, and the orientation of this theory to the poem and the reader, as opposed to the poet (as in Romantic poetic theory). I shall argue that Browning should be regarded as a central figure in the Victorian subject-matter debate, and as a central figure in Victorian poetic theory. The debates about subject-matter do not imply an undermining of the aesthetic value of poetry but they do imply a firm belief in the importance of the content of poetry and the effect of poetry. Victorian poetic theory has often been presented as being narrow-mindedly didactic, naive, and vague. Even the finest critics did not develop a critical vocabulary, and few attempted to examine the technical aspects of the art-form. I hope to offer a more positive view of Victorian poetics--a view which I shall illustrate by reference to Browning and the Victorian subject-matter debate.

NOTES TO PART TWO--INTRODUCTION

¹ Reported by E.B.B. in a letter to Browning of 17 February 1845 (Kintner I, 24).

² There is a problem with this interpretation. Tennyson's artist or soul apparently contemplates nothing very active in this involvement with common humanity. The desire is merely to 'mourn and pray'. But the similarity of 'The Palace of Art' to 'Lady Clara Vere de Vere' suggests that these private activities are only a part of the purging away of the guilt, and that more directly social activities are also to be undertaken. This reading is also implied by the line, 'Perchance I may return with others there'.

³ Modern Painters I, Pt i, Sec 1, Ch 2, § 3. Works III, 92.

⁴ Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 1, § 14. Works V, 30-31.

⁵ Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 1, § 15. Works V, 31.

⁶ Preface to First Edition of Modern Painters (1843). Works III, 4.

⁷ Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 2, § 8. Works V, 42. Although one immediately recognizes the truth of this statement, it is a little ironic that in volume after volume Ruskin persists in making magisterial pronouncements, often about rather trivial matters (for example, 'a peach is nobler than a hawthorn berry', Works V, 67).

⁸ Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 2, § 8. Works V, 42-43. Cf. Swinburne's remarks in 'L'Année Terrible': 'No form is obsolete, no subject out of date, if the right man be there to rehandle it' (Works XIII, 247). Like Ruskin, Swinburne puts everything down to the artist's sense of what is proper to art. He too denies the possibility of applying hard and fast rules as to what constitutes great art.

⁹ In The Stones of Venice I, Ch 1, § 49, Ruskin says that he hopes to make 'the Stones of Venice touch-stones' (Works IX, 57). It is interesting to compare Ruskin's Preface to the First Edition (1851) with Arnold's conclusion to his Preface of 1853. Ruskin argues that architecture concerns all men and should

not be left to the caprice of architects, or the mercy of contractors. There is not, indeed, anything in the following essay bearing on the special forms and needs of modern buildings; but the principles it inculcates are universal; and they are illustrated from the remains of a city which should surely be interesting to the men of London, as affording the richest existing examples of architecture raised by a mercantile community, for civil uses, and domestic magnificence.

(Works IX, 10)

¹⁰ E.g. in the Preface (1853), Arnold says that the reading of classical literature has 'a steady and composing effect upon [the] judgment, not of literary works only, but of men and events in general' (CPW I, 13). In 'Maurice de Guérin' (1863) he writes that poetry 'illuminates man; it gives him a satisfying sense of reality; it reconciles him with himself and the universe' (CPW III, 33).

¹¹ The weakness and flexibility of such labels can easily be demonstrated. For example, Pater is generally regarded as an aesthete, but in his essay 'Style' (1888) he sounds remarkably like Arnold at his 'pragmatic' best: 'If art be devoted further to the increase of man's happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truths about ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God, it will also be great art' (Appreciations, p. 36).

¹² He writes: 'What [Browning] wished to achieve in the "Parleying" was nothing less than an epic fullness which would show the progress of the pilgrim soul from despair to bliss and which would ultimately be no more autobiographical than the "Divine Comedy"' (Browning's Later Poetry, 1871-1881, p. 202).

Chapter Three

THE UNPOETICAL AGE:

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF ESCAPE

Poetry, in our days, is either a Regret or a Desire. It looks backward mournfully upon the Past, or it looks forward hopefully to the Future; but it dare not or cannot sing the Present. There is wondrous activity in our age, but there is no united action. . . . There is wondrous intelligence applying itself to the purposes of life, but there is no convergence to one common centre, no emanation from one common faith. Consequently there is nothing epic in our life; nothing broad, massy, or magnificent in compass and in unity. The Singer has nothing to sing. Poetry is not dead; the age is not prosaic, except--as all ages are--to prosaic souls; but that intellectual anarchy of creeds which displaces the ancient faith, and leaves us also with strong poetic impulses, yet destitute of a great Poem. . . . Singular it is to note how men of poetic genius try to escape from this condition.

George Lewes, The Leader 1 (1850), 159

The absence of care for personal beauty, which is another great characteristic of the age, adds to this feeling in a twofold way: first, by turning all reverent thoughts away from human nature; and making us think of men as ridiculous or ugly creatures, getting through the world as well as they can, and spoiling it in doing so; not ruling it in a kingly way and crowning all its loveliness. . . . It is not, however, only to existing inanimate nature that our want of beauty in person and dress has driven us. The imagination of it, as it was seen in our ancestors, haunts us continually; and while we yield to the present fashion, or act in accordance with the dullest modern principles of economy and utility, we look fondly back to the manner of the ages of chivalry, and delight in painting, to the fancy, the fashions we pretend to despise, and the splendours we think it wise to abandon.

John Ruskin, Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 16, § 14,15
(Works V, 325-26)

The 'escape' with which this chapter concerns itself is not primarily 'escapism', in the sense of ignoring the real world and losing oneself in a world of fantasy, but an 'escape' in the special sense that George Lewes intends when he writes of the Victorian poets' desire to escape or overcome the debilitating confusion of opposing forces in his age. What I mean by a subject-matter of escape is a subject chosen deliberately by the poet to counteract those conditions in the age which prevent the creation of 'a great Poem'. Those poets who choose this means of escape imply that: 1. whether a poem is great or not is determined mainly by its subject-matter, 2. the subjects which make great poetry are not to be found in the Victorian world, and, 3. poetry has laws and standards independent of time or place.

F.R. Leavis in New Bearings in English Poetry (1950) wrote that, 'Victorian poetry admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant and unpoetical, and that no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal' (p. 15). He rightly makes Browning an exception to this, but in such a way as to suggest that his refusal to withdraw from the world is the result of naivety and not of any exceptional understanding of his age or his art. Browning's poetry 'belongs to the world he lives in, and he lives happily in the Victorian world with no sense of disharmony' (p. 19). His interests 'are not the interests of an adult sensitive mind'. 'He did not need to withdraw into a dream-world, because he was able to be a naive romantic of love and action on the waking plane' (p. 20). What Leavis does in fact is to reproduce a common Victorian contradiction: the disharmonies of the age (what Lewes calls the 'intellectual anarchy of creeds', and what Arnold calls 'the bewildering confusion of our times'), make the Victorian world unsuitable material for poetry, and yet to withdraw from this world

is somehow reprehensible, a weak admission of failure.

Browning is scorned by Leavis because he does not apparently feel, or suffer from, this dilemma. Leavis does not really consider the possibility that Browning not only faces the dilemma, but also overcomes it. Philip Drew in The Poetry of Browning (pp. 421-27) vigorously attacks these and other statements by Leavis. Indeed the attack is so vigorous that I feel that no further defence of Browning is necessary, and I use Leavis mainly to draw attention to Browning's opposition to a subject-matter of escape, and to show that this subject-matter is essentially an aspect of Victorian poetic theory, a statement about what poetry is, and what poetry cannot be or do, rather than a simple interest in exotic poetic materials.

In the Introduction to Part Two, I drew attention to the poet's divided sense of duty, to the seeming incompatibility of his duty to his art and his duty to serve his fellow man. The latter duty was commonly associated with the belief that the poet must face the reality of his times and find his subject-matter in what John L. Tupper called 'the living world'. In a letter of 30 January 1846, E.B.B. writes to Browning about a new poem by Tennyson (which eventually became The Princess):

it is in blank verse & a fairy tale, & called the
'University', the university-members being all
females. . . . Now isn't the world too old and
fond of steam, for blank verse poems, in ever so
many books, to be written on the fairies?

(Kintner I, 427)

E.B.B.'s attitude is that poetry must show that it is part of the mature and serious modern world and must not indulge in frivolous subjects.

Browning's reply to the letter is interesting:

the projected book,--title, scheme, all of it,--that is astounding;--and fairies? If 'Thorpes and barnes, sheep-pens and dairies--this maketh that there ben no fairies'--locomotives and the broad or narrow gauge must keep the very ghosts of them away--But how the fashion of this world passes; the forms its beauty & truth take. (Kintner I, 428-29)

Browning's astonishment at Tennyson's subject-matter (as described in E.B.B.'s letter) stems from his realisation that the modern world requires new forms or expressions of 'beauty & truth'; that 'fairies' have not the faintest correspondence with the character of the beauty and truth of modern reality. Unlike E.B.B., Browning does not condemn a fairy subject-matter because he feels it is childish or trivial, but because he does not believe that such a subject-matter can be used to express the beauty and truth of 'this world'. The 'fashion', the way in which the world is perceived and understood, has changed, and in Browning's view a truth about modern life cannot be conveyed through a subject-matter dealing with fairies.

In this letter one can see that Browning makes the subject-matter and form of poetry--the means of poetic expression--dependent upon the fashionable or current ways of perception. For Browning, modernity in poetry, then, is not a matter of superficial realism: he does not say that Tennyson should write about locomotives and broad or narrow gauges. Browning's point is that the environment, the character of the times, the historical development of man and his world, has involved changes in the way man thinks and feels. I shall return to this point later.

Most poets and critics recognized that man and his world had changed, and that man's thoughts and feelings had also suffered change, but it was not generally accepted that the forms of beauty and truth had changed. The dilemma which F.R. Leavis observes is that the

Victorians cannot find beauty and truth in their own world, and can only include these qualities in their art by withdrawing from their world, but such a withdrawal is an admission of weakness or failure. This dilemma can be seen in the two quotations which open the chapter.

Ruskin notes the division between the real world and the world of the imagination. The Victorian world, with the ugliness of its physical environment and the mechanical and materialistic character of its thought, demeans and belittles man's spirit, which seeks redress in the world of the imagination by dwelling on scenes and eras of beauty and human nobility. The dangerously ambiguous position of art is implied in the latter half of the quotation: while man is continually haunted by this desire for beauty, which is an essential part of his nature, he believes that this is something outwith the reality of life, and consequently something trivial.

The crux of the matter in both Lewes and Ruskin is the question of the relation of art to life. In 1850 John L. Tupper, in 'The Subject in Art, II', wrote concerning 'the propriety of choosing the subject from past or present time':

that Art, to become a more powerful engine of civilisation, assuming a practically humanizing tendency (the admitted function of Art), should be made more directly conversant with the things, incidents, and influences which surround and constitute the living world of those whom Art proposes to improve, and, whether it should appear in event that Art can not assume this attitude without jeopardizing her specific existence, that such a consummation were desirable must be equally obvious in either case. (p. 122)

Tupper states the issues most succinctly, and, unfortunately, rather ambiguously. The passage draws attention to the central problem of Victorian poetics: the vagueness of the understanding of the nature and function of poetry. What is the 'specific existence' of poetry?

In what way is poetry a 'powerful engine of civilisation'? Despite this lack of clarity, Tupper perceptively focuses on the larger questions which lie at the heart of the subject-matter debate. The belief in the 'humanizing tendency' of poetry lies behind the work of almost every Victorian artist and critic. It is the uncertainty as to the form or character of this 'humanizing tendency' which creates the problems. Tupper uses the adverbial form of a word which occurs frequently in Victorian criticism--'practical'--and although his pragmatic view of art sounds Philistine and crude, it gets to the essential question of the value of art.

The passage revolves around the relationship between art and the 'living world of those whom Art proposes to improve'. How does the 'humanizing tendency' of art operate on man? Does it operate more powerfully when 'made more directly conversant with the things, incidents, and influences' of contemporary life? Most important of all, Tupper hints that the 'specific existence' of art may be jeopardized by an attempt to make it 'more directly' and 'practically' relevant to life. What does Tupper mean by the 'specific existence' of art? What Tupper is saying is that art must engage in areas of life not normally associated with art, so that in effect the dividing lines between, say, religion, philosophy, and art, become blurred, and it becomes no longer possible to regard art as having a 'specific existence'. Art has, in effect, become part of everyday existence, part of life itself. This would constitute the complete absorption of art into life, the artist's desertion of his palace of art for a cottage in the vale. Tupper's article suggests the main issues of this chapter, and in particular focuses attention on the importance of subject-matter in conveying the relationship between art and life.

A. ARNOLD'S POETIC THEORY

This chapter centres on Matthew Arnold for several reasons. Browning recognized that Arnold represented an attitude to poetry which challenged the essentials of his own views. Arnold's poetic theory particularly concentrates on the poet's choice of subject-matter, but demonstrates most clearly how this interest in subject-matter reflects what is really a comprehensive review of the position of poetry in an 'unpoetical age'. Finally, Arnold's 'escape' illustrates the complexity of what Leavis called the Victorian 'protest of withdrawal'. I believe that this is much too simple and negative an understanding of the 'escape'.

Writers like Arnold, Ruskin, and Morris do not withdraw from the actual world, what they do is to criticize the popular view of their age, and to support this criticism by contrasting their civilisation with other civilisations whose qualities demonstrate the imperfections and faults in their own world. Art embodies those qualities in which the age is deficient, and so counteracts or alleviates those conditions in the age which render life disturbing or dissatisfying. What makes Arnold the ideal representative of those poets who choose a subject-matter remote from their own period is his attempt not only to justify his choice of such a subject-matter, but to argue that this subject-matter is the only means by which poetry can truly serve mankind.

Arnold heals the breach between the poet's duty to his art and to his age, by declaring that it is by observing the boundaries and laws of poetry, by strictly maintaining its 'specific existence', that

poetry can best meet the needs of the age. Like Browning, Arnold attempts to combine aesthetic and pragmatic notions of poetry, but, unlike Browning, he refuses to admit that aesthetic notions change, that 'the fashion of this world passes; the forms its beauty & truth take' alter. It is this essential difference in their understanding of the nature of poetry, and of the relationship between poetry and human development, which forms the basis of Browning's criticism of Arnold's theory and of his defence of his own. The structure of the chapter will follow the perspective outlined in Chapter One: the milieu of the age, the poetics of the time, and the outlook of the individual poet. Since the general background has already been dealt with, this perspective will specifically refer to Matthew Arnold's perception of the situation, and to the poetic theory which was based on this perception. Browning's criticisms of Arnold's views will be examined in the second half of the chapter.

I

The notion that the age was unpoetical was so well established by 1850 that George Lewes uses the phrase as something of a cliché: 'Poets who feel themselves equal if not superior to those who formerly were hailed with acclamations, and disgusted at receiving no ovations themselves, declare the age is unpoetical. It is only enlightened' ('On Literature', p. 86). The word 'enlightened' was also used by Macaulay in his essay 'Milton' (1825): 'the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half-civilised people is poetical' (p. 3b). It is in Arnold's 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1869) that one begins to realize the implications of what is meant by

'enlightened':

The predominance of thought, of reflection, in modern epochs is not without its penalties; in the unsound, in the over-tasked, in the over-sensitive, it has produced the most painful, the most lamentable results; it has produced a state of feeling unknown to less enlightened but perhaps healthier epochs--the feeling of depression, the feeling of ennui. (CPW I, 32)

The word 'enlightened' is associated with philosophical and critical thought. Arnold suggests that 'the predominance of thought' in his age enervates the spirit.

Ruskin in his Modern Painters III, uses almost exactly the same terms to describe the era: 'On the whole, these are much sadder ages than the early ones; not sadder in a noble and deep way, but in a dim wearied way,--the way of ennui, and jaded intellect, and uncomfortableness of soul and body' (Works V, 321). It is to be noted that Arnold speaks of 'the predominance of thought', in other words, there is an imbalance, and this imbalance has resulted in the depression of the feelings and emotions, in a depression of the soul. More than this, the character of the thought is unhealthy in that it is divisive and disturbing: 'the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust' (my emphasis, Preface, 1853, CPW I, 1). The 'predominance of thought' produces a 'suffering [which] finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done' (Preface, pp. 2-3).

The inability to resolve this mental distress by some decisive act was not confined to the individual. George Lewes observes how the conditions of the age stimulated the desire for a great poem but prevented

its execution. Lewes implies that an epic, or great poem, is the expression of the ideas which unify and give meaning to the different strands of life in an age. The Victorian age experienced an 'intellectual anarchy of creeds', a 'dialogue of the mind with itself': a vacillation between an emotional and desired faith, and a deep intellectual scepticism.

Arnold's sensitivity to his age allowed him to identify those aspects of man's humanity most endangered by 'the bewildering confusion of [the] times', and hence to define the nature of the 'humanizing tendency' which, like Tupper and most Victorian critics, he recognized as being the function of poetry. Arnold notes the crushing dominance of debilitating thought, of the awareness of time as an inevitable and impersonal force reducing all to a state of impermanence, and of the absence of any stable values by which man could control, balance, and guide his life. His aim is to make poetry a force of permanence, unity, and stability. In the Preface (1853) he asks: 'What are the eternal objects of poetry, among all nations, and at all times?' (my emphasis)

The poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time.
(my emphasis, CPW I, 4)

What Arnold does in his Preface is to make the 'specific existence' of poetry, 'with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws', the permanent 'touchstone' of values and standards by which man can interpret, criticize, and understand his life. He recognizes that 'the present age makes great claims upon us: we owe it service' (Preface, CPW I, 13), but this service can best be rendered, can only be rendered, if the poet can

'escape the danger of producing poetical works conceived in the spirit of the passing time, and which partake of its transitoriness' (Preface, CPW I, 13). Poetry best satisfies the needs of the age by being independent of the age.

In 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1869), Arnold identifies the 'peculiar demand' of modern times. As in the Preface (1853) he recognizes that the main characteristic of modern times is its introspectiveness ('the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves'). In 'On the Modern Element' he writes:

An intellectual deliverance is the peculiar demand of those ages which are called modern. . . . Such a deliverance is emphatically, whether we will or no, the demand of the age in which we ourselves live. All intellectual pursuits our age judges according to their power of helping to satisfy this demand. (CPW I, 19)

In 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), he most clearly connects this deliverance with poetry:

'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.'

He goes on:

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.
(CPW IX, 161-62)

Arnold regards poetry as the instrument most fit to meet the particular needs and demands of the Victorian era.¹ It is clearly a pragmatic view of poetry, and Arnold himself uses this word in his Preface (1853): 'For the more serious kinds, for pragmatic poetry, to use an excellent expression of Polybius, they were more difficult and severe in the range of subjects which they [the Greeks] permitted' (CPW I, 7). The criterion of judgment is how far a poet is able to produce the effects which will help to satisfy the 'peculiar demand' of the age.

Arnold's understanding of the term 'pragmatic poetry' is much richer than previous interpretations. Although Arnold shares the main characteristics of the typical pragmatic critic (as defined by Abrams), his vision of such a poetry is so enlarged that his pragmatic theory should be regarded as a new interpretation of poetry. For Arnold poetry is to encompass all human thought and achievement, reuniting and completing the isolated and confusing fragments of the various branches of knowledge. In 'Maurice de Guérin' (1863), he describes the 'highest power' of poetry as

the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us . . . we feel ourselves . . . to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have their secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies us as no other can.
(CPW III, 13)

Poetry appeals 'to the whole man' and is 'at bottom a criticism of life' ('Wordsworth', 1879, CPW IX, 46).

This completeness is the attraction of poetry for Arnold; it appeals not to a single faculty but to the whole being, and its field of study is not an aspect of life, but all of life. In a letter to

Clough, dated 28 October 1852, Arnold explains that 'modern poetry can only subsist by its contents: by becoming a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only' (Letters to Clough, p. 124). While earlier apologists of poetry regarded poetry as a subsidiary power of morality, religion, or philosophy, Arnold regards poetry as actually absorbing these areas of thought, ('and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry'). In his 'Heinrich Heine' (1863), Arnold observes that the systems which constitute what Carlyle called the 'ground-plan of the All' no longer correspond to actual life, and 'the awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit'. The 'institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules' do not now correspond to 'the wants of . . . actual life' (CPW III, 109). In other words, there is no adequate interpretation of the modern world, no 'Idea of the world' (Letters to Clough, p. 97). It is this which Arnold believes poetry can provide as a 'magister vitae'.

Arnold's view of the future and function of poetry illustrates important aspects of mid-Victorian poetic theory, and suggests the ways in which what could seem to be merely a typical pragmatic tendency in criticism is in fact a new development in poetic criticism. His Preface (1853) seems particularly suggestive of those factors which mark the work of what Abrams describes as a 'typical pragmatic critic':

Looking upon a poem as a 'making', a contrivance for affecting an audience, the typical pragmatic critic is engrossed with formulating the methods--the skill, or 'Crafte of making' as Ben Jonson called it--for achieving the effects desired. These methods, traditionally comprehended under the term poesis, or 'art' (in phrases such as 'the art of poetry'), are formulated as precepts and rules whose warrant consists

either in their being derived from the qualities of works whose success and long survival have proved their adaptation to human nature, or else in their being grounded directly on the psychological laws governing the responses of men in general. The rules, therefore, are inherent in the qualities of each excellent work of art, and when excerpted and codified these rules serve equally to guide the artist in making, and the critics in judging, any future product.²

The novelty of Arnold's theory, and of Victorian pragmatic poetic theory in general, becomes clearer and more forceful in Arnold's later works where he turns more decidedly to the cultural and social context of poetry. In such essays as 'Maurice de Guérin' (1863), 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1869), and 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), it is clear that poetry is regarded with particular reference to a specific era. As I have suggested, this is the strongest characteristic of Victorian criticism in general.

The pragmatism of Arnold's vision of poetry also differs from earlier theories in that the bearing which poetry is to have on human life is much greater and less abstract than ever previously considered. The immense claims made for poetry, argued as they are from a close attention to the actual present, have a concreteness and a relevance to reality rarely found in earlier poetics. As Abrams states

it was only in the early Victorian period, when all discourse was explicitly or tacitly thrown into the two exhaustive modes of imaginative and rational, expressive and assertive, that religion fell together with poetry in opposition to science, and that religion, as a consequence, was converted into poetry, and poetry into a kind of religion. (p. 335)

This observation can be expressed even more positively since it is the very backbone of Victorian poetic thought, and poets either worked towards this end or reacted against the conversion of poetry into what

Arnold termed a 'magister vitae'. If one looks at 'The Study of Poetry' the immensity of the vision becomes clear: Arnold looks to poetry as the sole agent of a human interpretation of the specialized and diversified knowledge of the nature of man and the universe.

According to Arnold, 'modern poetry can only subsist by its contents: by becoming a complete magister vitae as the poetry of the ancients did: by including, as theirs did, religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only'. I have quoted this again because the phrase, 'instead of existing as poetry only', seems remarkably like John L. Tupper's view that poetry may have to surrender its 'specific existence'. However there is an important difference: Arnold's view is that poetry can embrace all areas of human life and become all inclusive; Tupper's view is that art or poetry, by engaging itself with the concerns of modern life, may lose its distinct identity and be absorbed into everyday life.

Arnold's poetic theory reconciles the nature with the function of poetry: in his theory it is by preserving the distinctive qualities of poetry that one best serves the needs of modern humanity. Tupper implies that to extend the subject-matter of poetry to deal with contemporary life, poetry may have to abandon that which normally distinguishes it from all other forms of discourse. Arnold states that by extending the range of poetic subject-matter to embrace subjects normally associated with other disciplines, poetry can include these disciplines, ('by including . . . religion with poetry, instead of existing as poetry only'). This is a crucial difference.

In the last chapter I argued that Browning believed that poetry, if it was to advance with the development of man, had to be reassessed and understood in new ways. In particular, Browning felt that poetry

had to lose some of those qualities commonly regarded as being the essence of poetry, (what Browning calls 'flowers' in 'Jochanan Hakkadosh'). Arnold's theory seems to offer a poetry which is relevant, indeed essential, to modern life and which is poetic in a traditional way, ('the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws'). His phrase 'the practice of poetry' sounds rather like 'the practice of law' or 'the practice of medicine', that is, it sounds like an occupation in which the practitioner is guided by the canons of his art, and in which the personality of the individual is of little account in the actual execution of his art. This may seem similar to what I called Browning's effacement of the poet, but again there is an important difference. Browning is concerned with the finished poem and its reception by the reader; his aim is to make the reader see the poem, the poet's conception of his subject, for himself, without the poet standing by and telling him what to think or feel. Arnold is concerned with the poet's writing of the poem. His concern is to curb the personal idiosyncrasies and emotions which may interfere with the creation of a great poem. The obvious question arises--What is a great poem?

In examining this question one realises that it is Arnold's belief that he can answer it which forms the core of his theory. If it is possible to identify those qualities which make a poem great, then one has a permanent and universal body of criteria by which to judge and regulate not only poetry, but life itself.³ This is Arnold's belief, and it is stated again and again. Poetry is a 'criticism of life' ('The Study of Poetry', CPW IX, 163); it is 'the most adequate interpretation of [an] age' ('On the Modern Element in Literature', CPW I, 22). Arnold believes that the qualities of great poetry are to

be found in classical Greek poetry. In his conclusion to the Preface he writes that as to 'what is sound and true in poetical art . . . the only sure guidance, the only solid footing [is to be found] among the ancients' (CPW I, 14). It is clear that Greek classical poetry is the ultimate guide to great poetry because it possesses and cultivates those qualities which Arnold feels are lacking in his own era.

In the Preface he speaks of the 'exclusive characteristics' of 'the great monuments of early Greek genius'--'the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity' (CPW I, 1). Greek poetry also provided guidance on the actual practice of poetry. I have already drawn attention to Arnold's admiration of the strict controls which Greek poetry imposed upon its poets, and how these controls could correct 'something of our [modern] caprice and eccentricity' (Preface to Second Edition of Poems, 1854, CPW I, 17). Most of all Arnold was attracted to classical poetry because of its effect--the whole of the Preface of 1853 emphasizes this point.

The most striking aspect of Arnold's theory is its calculation. His creation of a poetic theory for his age seems almost like a scientific problem which has been thoroughly studied, logically evaluated, and finally solved. In 'On the Modern Element in Literature' Arnold is quite explicit as to how he arrives at his solution:

the spectacle, the facts, presented for the comprehension of the present age, are indeed immense. The facts consist of the events, the institutions, the sciences, the arts, the literatures, in which human life has manifested itself up to the present time: the spectacle is the collective life of humanity. (CPW I, 20)

He goes on:

What facts, then, let us ask ourselves, what elements of the spectacle before us, will naturally be most interesting to a highly developed age like our own, to an age making the demand which we have described for an intellectual deliverance by means of the complete intelligence of its own situation? Evidently, the other ages similarly developed, and making the same demand. And what past literature will naturally be most interesting to such an age as our own? Evidently, the literatures which have most successfully solved for their ages the problem which occupies ours: the literatures which in their day and for their own nation have adequately comprehended, have adequately represented, the spectacle before them. . . . Such an epoch and such a literature are, in fact, modern, in the same sense in which our own age and literature are modern; they are founded upon a rich past and upon an instructive fulness of experience. (pp. 21-22)

The ability of great poetry to comprehend and represent adequately the spectacle of human life is for Arnold the property of poetry which makes it the highest form of art, and indeed the highest form of knowledge.⁴

In his 'Epilogue to Lessing's Laocoön' Arnold tackles the problem of distinguishing between the arts. The poet must reveal both the externals and the internals of a moment--'The aspect of the moment show, / The feeling of the moment know!' But more than this, 'he must life's movement tell! / The thread which binds it all in one, / And not its separate parts alone'. The poet must catch 'the stream of life's majestic whole'. In 'On the Modern Element' he writes of 'the spectacle [of] the collective life of humanity. And everywhere there is connexion, everywhere there is illustration: no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures' (p. 20). What Arnold does here is to make the poet the one true interpreter of life: only the poet grasps both the appearance and the emotion of a moment (a specific period or time), and can relate these to the all of life, to the eternal elements which connect all of humanity through all time. Essentially, then, what the

poet does is to comprehend and to order life: the moment is put into a perspective.

In a letter to Clough, circa 1849, Arnold says that poets 'must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness' (Letters to Clough, p. 97). Poets must evolve for themselves a concept of order. Clough also makes a similar point in his 'Lecture on the Poetry of Wordsworth' (circa 1850). He praises Wordsworth for his ability 'to lay slowly the ponderous foundations of pillars to sustain man's moral fabric, to fix a centre around which the chaotic elements of human impulse and desire might take solid form and move in their ordered ellipses, to originate a spiritual vitality, this was perhaps greater than sweeping over glad blue waters or inditing immortal novels', (my emphasis, p. 318). The comparison in the last phrase is with Byron and Scott, who are regarded as less great because what they offer is pleasurable but not morally, religiously, or philosophically useful.

The closest thing to a spiritual epic which the Victorian age could produce was In Memoriam, and this is a collection of fragments, with a movement, not of steady progression to the inevitable conclusion and reassertion of faith, but of ebb and flow, thesis and antithesis, of voices rather than a voice. Clough's vision of the poetic achievement of Wordsworth seems to look forward to just such a poem as In Memoriam. The point of order, of stability, is not static, but controlled by the poet who creates a centre around which the chaotic elements 'move in their ordered ellipses' (my emphasis). The implied analogy is of the orbit of planets, but if one imagines the pattern produced by the movement of various objects forming their different ellipses, one can see how suitable an image this is for Victorian poetry. The order is

not one of circular perfection but one which appears irregular and complex even after the pattern is complete.

There is a difference between Arnold's and Clough's view of how the poet should order his material, and it is a difference which essentially challenges Arnold's belief that his classical theory can produce a poetry relevant to modern life. Before taking this point further, it is important to observe that both Arnold and Clough recognize the necessity for a poem to establish or to contain within itself an idea of order, a controlling element or centre.

At a time of 'an intellectual anarchy of creeds' (Lewes), and of a growing sense of alienation, where was the poet to find what Lewes called a 'common centre', or what Arnold called 'an Idea of the world', which could be accepted by, or even communicated to, those 'mortal millions' estranged and isolated from himself?

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
 With echoing straits between us thrown,
 Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
 We mortal millions live alone.
 ('To Marguerite--Continued', 1-4)

These problems affected the whole of poetry--subject-matter, form, language. The poet was like the figure in Arnold's 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse':

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
 The other powerless to be born,
 With nowhere yet to rest my head
 (85-87)

The restlessness expressed here captures the mood of early and mid-Victorian poetry in its search for a suitable vehicle or frame of communication. This explains, in part, why so many poets chose their

materials from remote cultures or past periods. Such materials have in themselves an order and tradition.

Yet there was felt to be a want of correspondence between those worlds chosen by the poets and the world in which their readers lived. Clough makes this point in his 'Review of Some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold' (1853): 'The modern novel is preferred to the modern poem, because we do here feel an attempt to include these indispensable latest addenda--these phenomena which, if we forget on Sunday, we must remember on Monday--these positive matters of fact, which people, who are not verse-writers, are obliged to have to do with' (p. 357). Arnold's letter to Clough, in which he states that the poet 'must begin with an Idea of the world', suggests that the poet must impose an order upon his poem: he must begin with a philosophy of life and structure his material according to this philosophy. Clough's opinion is very different. Clough sees the poet as building into the poem the means by which all is ordered. The poet fixes 'a centre around which the chaotic elements of human impulse and desire' attain some meaningful order and significance. Clough's poet makes the poem itself a structured universe in which the materials take on an order latent in themselves, ('and move in their ordered ellipses'). If an order is imposed upon a poem, if it is not in some way inherent in the materials themselves, on what authority can it be accepted? How can the poet escape the charge of personal 'caprice and eccentricity' in his choice of this order or Idea of the world?

It is exactly 'caprice and eccentricity' which Arnold attempted to avoid, but in fact he can only avoid them by severely limiting, rather than extending, the range and effect of poetry. This explains Arnold's particular concern with subject-matter. 'For what reason was the Greek

tragic poet confined to so limited a range of subjects? Because there are so few actions which unite in themselves, in the highest degree, the conditions of excellence: and it was not thought that on any but an excellent subject could an excellent poem be constructed' (my emphasis, Preface (1853), CPW I, 6). 'For the more serious kinds, for pragmatic poetry . . . they [the Greeks] were more difficult and severe in the range of subjects which they permitted' (Preface, p. 7). The order of a poem, reflecting an order in life, can be achieved by selecting subjects which contain in themselves this order. Yet if these subjects are drawn from regions and times remote from Victorian Britain, then, in Clough's view, the order and the effect of the poem must also be remote from the 'living world' of his contemporary audience.

A balanced view of both the advantages and possible pitfalls of choosing a subject-matter remote from contemporary reality is given by Arthur Henry Hallam in his essay 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson' (1831). In his discussion of 'The Ballad of Oriana' he says:

We know of no more happy seizure of the antique spirit in the whole compass of our literature; yet there is no foolish self-desertion, no attempt at obliterating the present, but every where a full discrimination of how much ought to be yielded, and how much retained. The author is well aware that the art of one generation cannot become that of another by any will or skill: but the artist may transfer the spirit of the past, making it a temporary form for his own spirit, and so effect, by idealizing power, a new and legitimate combination. (p. 624)

Hallam recognizes, as does Arnold, the value of a past culture or tradition. It is a 'temporary form' for the poet's spirit: a poetry for the present using 'the spirit of the past' as an idea of the world. But Hallam also notes the dangers--self-desertion, an obliteration of

the present, and a failure to determine how much ought to be yielded and how much retained. Subjects from the past or from remote places could provide the poet with a borrowed frame of ideas and beliefs in which to express his own thoughts and feelings evoked by his own age. On the other hand, they could be used as a means to escape both the self and the age, and this Hallam condemns, as did most Victorian critics.

The reason and motive for the escape, and the use made of the escape, are determined by the poet's idea of what poetry is and what its function is. The poetry with which the majority of Victorian critics concerned themselves was a poetry of content and effect. The escape which Arnold and Hallam sanction, in their different ways, is from the chaotic and enervating environment of the age to a model environment deliberately chosen to counteract the main ills of the actual Victorian milieu. It is an escape to allow the poet to make a poetry adequate for the requirements of the age, but also a poetry which is pleasurable as a work of art.

It was only towards the end of the century that the complete independence of art and the artist from the condition of mankind in his era became an attitude considered worthy of serious contemplation and debate. What Arnold, Carlyle, and Ruskin sought in art was a force embodying, affecting, and arousing the highest powers of man's humanity, acting as a 'magister vitae', as a direct influence on life, and hence affording 'to the men who live in [the age] the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling', (Preface, 1853, CPW I, 13). The artist was to be a Moses in the wilderness, a very different figure indeed to Whistler's concept of him in 1885. For Whistler, the artists' 'world was completely severed from that of their fellow creatures, with whom

sentiment is mistaken for poetry, and for whom there is no perfect work that shall not be explained by the benefit conferred upon themselves'.⁵

Arnold's aim was to overcome this isolation of the artist and to give him an integral place in society. Poetry was specifically related to the present in which he lived and to the progress of his fellow man. It was an instrument of persuasion, with much more than an independent aesthetic value. It exerted 'an influence upon man's sense for conduct, his sense for beauty' ('Literature and Science', 1882, CPW X, 67). In his essay 'Wordsworth' (1879), Arnold writes 'that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,--to the question: How to live'. 'A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life' (CPW IX, 46). But in his essay 'Byron' (1881), he makes an important addition to these remarks: 'in poetry, however, the criticism of life has to be made conformably to the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty' (CPW IX, 228).

In this part of the chapter I have attempted to show how Arnold's theory is directed by an awareness of the conditions and needs of his age. Arnold is very clearly concerned with the relevance of poetry to modern life. His theory is patently pragmatic, concerned with the effect of poetry upon the reader. But Arnold's theory is also concerned with poetry as an art-form. His poetic theory, then, attempts to reconcile the aims of serving the age and of serving art. In the Preface to the Second Edition of Poems (1854), he writes that the classical authors,

can help to cure us of what is, it seems to me, the great vice of our intellect, manifesting itself in our incredible vagaries in literature, in art, in religion, in morals: namely, that it is fantastic, and wants sanity. Sanity,--that is the great virtue of the ancient literature. (CPW I, 17)

In essence his theory is corrective: it is a reaction to, and correction of, what he sees as the excesses and flaws of Romantic subjectivism--'the great vice of our intellect' in literature and in life. Ultimately, it is an attempt to use poetry as 'an instrument through which both he and his contemporaries could recapture the mental and spiritual, as well as the artistic, discipline of the past' (Jamison, Arnold and the Romantics, pp. 18-19).

II

While the first section examined Arnold's reaction to the milieu of the age, this next section will examine the ways in which Arnold's theory is a response to the poetics of the age. A major point of my argument has been that Arnold's theory is both pragmatic and aesthetic, therefore this division is more for the sake of clarity of argument than for any true division in Arnold's concept of the nature and function of poetry. Arnold's classicism is offered as an alternative to the Romantic tradition.

In his Preface to Merope (1858), he writes: 'The tradition is a great matter to a poet; it is an unspeakable support; it gives him the feeling that he is treading on solid ground' (CPW I, 53). The classical tradition, as the quotation above from the Preface to the Second Edition of Poems shows, is regarded as being beneficial to both poetry and human life. The danger of the Romantic tradition was seen by Arnold as being

its tendency to chaos, to formlessness and complete subjectivity. In 1849 he wrote, 'more and more I feel bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything' (Unpublished Letters, p. 17). It is because poetry in his time must become a 'magister vitae', and subsist by its contents, that Shelley is regarded as having 'the incurable want, in general, of a sound subject-matter, and the incurable fault, in consequence, of unsubstantiality', and is finally dismissed as a 'beautiful and ineffectual angel' ('Byron', 1881, CPW IX, 218,237).

Arnold not only dismisses the formlessness and lack of content of Romantic poetry, but also the language. He states 'that Keats and Shelley were on a false track' in their 'exuberance of expression'. Lyricism, musical sensualness, and beauty of expression are not the essentials of poetry in a mature and modern age. Such qualities may even be extraneous, a diversion both for the reader and for the development of poetry. 'The language, style and general proceeding of a poetry which has such an immense task to perform [to become a 'magister vitae'], must be very plain direct and severe: and it must not lose itself in parts and episodes and ornamental work, but must press forwards to the whole' (Letters to Clough, p. 124).

The Romantic tradition was not adequate for the requirements of Arnold's pragmatic poetry, or even for the more general Victorian vision of poetry as 'a deep thing, a teaching thing, the most surely and wisely elevating of human things'. The phrase is taken from an essay by Walter Bagehot, 'Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning' (1864). In this essay Bagehot argues that Byron's work degraded poetry, and says, 'as wholes, these exaggerated stories were worthless; they taught nothing' (pp. 321-22). By mid-century the change of attitude to the major Romantic poets as

expressed by Arnold in his later essays, 'Heinrich Heine' (1863), 'Wordsworth' (1879), 'John Keats' (1880), and 'Shelley' (1888), was already discernible in the mainstream of Victorian poetry, and in the lesser streams of criticism, which took longer to emerge from the Romantic influence.

In the second section of Chapter One, I argued that Victorian poetic theory should be seen as a reassessment of poetry; a reassessment caused by the inability of Romantic poetic theory to meet the new needs and conditions of the Victorian world. In a letter to his mother, dated 5 June 1869, Arnold wrote: 'My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it' (Letters II, 9). In many respects this is true: critics of our own day recognize that what Arnold does is 'to gather up and give more adequate expression to ideas and attitudes fairly widely shared by at least a substantial minority of critics and general readers'.⁶ This is particularly clear from a study of Arnold's Preface (1853).

Sidney Coulling's work on Arnold's part in the Victorian controversies concerning poetry has shown that the Preface was much more than an explanation of why Empedocles on Etna had been omitted from the volume of poems. The Preface was in the main a reaction to the dominance of Romantic subjectivism in both the theory and practice of contemporary poetry, and to the excesses to which this led. For Arnold these excesses were dangerously evident in the works and criticism which were attracting the greatest attention and hence setting the mould for future poetry.

In the early and mid-Victorian period the Spasmodic group of poets,

such as Philip James Bailey, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith, made a strong impact, and their works displayed most of the defects which so worried Arnold. Formlessness, disunity, lack of control, and lack of any major important theme or subject, were not widely regarded as serious failings in their poetic art. In the Preface, Arnold quotes David Masson as an example of the modern critic who not only promotes a false practice but also false aims: 'a true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry' (CPW I, 8). For Arnold such a practice and such aims degrade poetry and its function. Without control or order, and a subject which permits such, there could be no complete work of art, no 'unity and profoundness of moral impression' (Preface, CPW I, 12).

Coulling also maintains that the Preface is a general reply to reviews of his volumes of 1849 and 1852, and a defence of his choice of classical subject-matter. In other words, it is part of a debate, and this, I feel, helps to explain Arnold's shifts of emphasis in later essays. The concern with a classical subject-matter dominates the Preface of 1853 because it was his subject-matter which had provoked the most attack at that time,⁷ but the broader themes behind the choice of classical subjects point the way to the issues which concern Arnold in later essays, and which lie at the heart of his poetic theory.

Coulling argues that 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1857), reveals a major change in Arnold's view from the Preface of 1853: from a totally literary stance, concerned with subject-matter, form, structure, and simplicity of style, Arnold shifts his interests to what are primarily social and ethical questions.⁸ I prefer to see this not so much as a major change of concern or interest, but as a shift of emphasis,

and as an indication of Arnold's own turning from indirect criticism through poetry to direct criticism in prose.

My argument has been that Arnold carefully assessed both the conditions and requirements of the age, and the situation of poetry and poetic criticism in the age. His aim was to achieve a balance between the poet's social responsibilities ('The present age makes great claims upon us'), and his responsibilities to his art ('the practice of poetry'). John L. Tupper's attitude, that art must be directly relevant to the age even if it meant jeopardizing her 'specific existence', was the kind of attitude which drove various artists and critics to be, as Swinburne put it, 'at one with the preachers of "art for art"'.⁹ The contradiction, noted earlier in this chapter, between an age which felt itself to be 'unpoetical' and yet demanded great poetry, was essentially a contradiction between what was believed to be the function of poetry and what was believed to be the nature of poetry. Swinburne will serve as an example of this uneasiness about the compatibility of serving the age and serving art.

In 'Notes on Poems and Reviews' (1866), Swinburne writes, if literature 'is not to deal with the full life of man and the whole nature of things, let it be cast aside with the rods and rattles of childhood' (Works XVI, 370). In 'L'Année Terrible' (1872), he states: 'above all things a work of positive excellence [is to be] judged by the laws of the special art to whose laws it is amenable. If the rules and conditions of that art be not observed, or if the work done be not great and perfect enough to rank among its triumphs, the poem, picture, statue, is a failure irredeemable and inexcusable by any show or any proof of high purpose and noble meaning' (A Study of Victor Hugo, Works XIII, 242). 'But on the other hand we refuse to admit that art of the

highest kind may not ally itself with moral or religious passion, with the ethics or the politics of a nation or an age' (*ibid.*, p. 243).

Swinburne declares that the first duty of art is that it be art, but unquestionably the demand of the age was that art ally itself with the central concerns of the times.

In 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), Arnold distils the essence of his poetic theory into exactly this union of serving the central concerns of the times and of creating great poetry:

In poetry, as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue or half-true.

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. (CPW IX, 163)

It is to be observed how neatly Arnold destroys the division between the demands of the age and his conception of the nature of great poetry. The first is made entirely dependent upon the second, so much so that he converts the various demands of the age into the one desire--'the best poetry is what we want'.

III

The third and final aspect of Arnold's poetic theory which I wish to consider is the personal element. I have shown how Arnold's theory takes special account of the requirements of the age, and how it is also a reaction to the poetic practices and theories current in the age, but it is also very much a personal solution to the problems of poetry in

an unpoetical age.

In the conclusion to the Preface, Arnold admits that his advocacy of the classical tradition as the exclusive guide to 'what is sound and true in poetical art' is ultimately based on a personal opinion: 'I seemed to myself to find the only sure guidance, the only solid footing, among the ancients' (my emphasis). In a letter to his sister, Mrs Forster, dated 6 August 1858, Arnold writes:

People do not understand what a temptation there is, if you cannot bear anything not very good, to transfer your operations to a region where form is everything. Perfection of a certain kind may there be attained, or at least approached, without knocking yourself to pieces, but to attain or approach perfection in the region of thought and feeling, and to unite this with perfection of form, demands not merely an effort and a labour, but an actual tearing of oneself to pieces, which one does not readily consent to (although one is sometimes forced to it) unless one can devote one's whole life to poetry.

(Letters I, 62-63)

Arnold in a way succumbed to the temptation and transferred his 'operations to a region where form is everything'.

In the Preface to Merope (1858), Arnold calls England 'the stronghold of the romantic school' and comments upon his 'supposed addiction to the classical school in poetry'. In this Preface it is clear that what attracts Arnold to classicalism is its power of 'consummate form'.

He writes that:

I desired to try, therefore, how much of the effectiveness of the Greek poetical forms I could retain in an English poem constructed under the conditions of those forms; of those forms, too, in their severest and most definite expression, in their application to dramatic poetry.

(CPW I, 39)

Again in this passage it is to be noted that Arnold is attracted to the control and guidance which the Greek poetical forms offer. The phrase

'constructed under the conditions of those forms' suggests a very impersonal, almost mechanical, mode of poetic creation, (see my earlier observation on the phrase 'the practice of poetry', p. 219). What Arnold seems to mean by 'a region where form is everything' is a poetry which is written in accordance with strongly defined rules and traditions. With such a poetry one can achieve 'perfection of a certain kind': the limited perfection of craftsmanship.

The letter to Mrs Forster explains why the temptation to accept this limited perfection is so great. The Greek tradition offered effective 'poetical forms' and 'the tradition, as it stood, afforded perfect materials to the tragic poet' (Preface to Merope, CPW I, 54). Without such a tradition, the poet must choose for himself a subject which is perfect 'in the region of thought and feeling, and to unite this with perfection of form'. As Arnold makes clear in the Preface (1853), he regards modern feeling as painful and depressing, and modern thought as disturbed by the confusion of the times, to achieve perfection of thought and feeling means for Arnold that the thoughts and feelings expressed must not only interest the reader 'but [must] also . . . inspire and rejoice the reader' (CPW I, 2). On top of this, the poet must order and compose his subject to a 'perfection of form', a perfection as a work of art.

The letter to Mrs Forster reveals that for Arnold to achieve a standard of poetry which satisfied his own sense of excellence demanded too much time and effort. Without a tradition which more or less allowed him to detach himself from the creation of the poem, allowed him to minimize his personal emotional and intellectual involvement with the subject, Arnold felt that to write well he had to tear himself to pieces. By this I think he means that he suffered acutely from the divisions

noted earlier: the intense awareness of the age with its change and confusion, and demands for service, and the duty of the poet to serve his art. In Arnold's view, to make the thought and feeling of his age poetical was not impossible, but it was very difficult. His solution was to work by analogy: to create poetry within the tradition of a parallel age, to work within the constructions of past artists without suffering the problems of the formative steps through which these constructions at first arose.¹⁰

At the conclusion of his letter to Mrs Forster, Arnold reveals that in his age the personal thoughts and feelings of the poet cannot be expressed naturally in poetry; it requires 'an overwhelming and in some degree morbid effort' to 'descend into yourself and produce the best of your thought and feeling'. Why should this be? I believe that the reason is that Arnold is aware that his personal thoughts and feelings are opposed to what he believes should be the effects of great poetry. In a letter to Clough he wrote that:

I am glad you like the 'Gipsy Scholar'--but what does it do for you? Homer animates--Shakespeare animates--in its poor way I think 'Sohrab and Rustum' animates--the 'Gipsy Scholar' at best awakens a pleasing melancholy. But this is not what we want.

The complaining millions of men
Darken in labour and pain--

what they want is something to animate and ennoble them--not merely to add zest to their melancholy or grace to their dreams.--I believe a feeling of this kind is the basis of my nature--and of my poetics.¹¹

In a poetical age thoughts and feelings are commonly and naturally produced because there is no division between what is personally and privately thought and felt, and what is publicly expressed and done. But as the Preface (1853) makes clear, Arnold's period is divided. The

public vision of the era is 'that it is an era of progress' (CPW I, 13). The private vision is that it is 'an age wanting in moral grandeur', 'an age of spiritual discomfort' (CPW I, 14). Since the poet's 'business is with [the] inward man' (Preface, CPW I, 5), it is this private vision which matters, and which renders the age unpoetical.

In 1888 Rowland Prothero reviewed Arnold's poetic career and drew attention to Arnold's constant awareness of, and involvement in, the major problems and issues of the age. He also recognized that this affected Arnold's poetry: 'A large section of his poetry consists almost entirely of criticism, whether social, moral, and religious' (p. 338). As Arnold himself realized, his poetry formed only a part of his life. The particular problems of poetry were not his exclusive concern but only an important part of his greater interest in the intellectual and spiritual condition of his era. Prothero wrote:

The aesthetic problem which Arnold solved by taking refuge in ancient Greece is only a different mode of stating the moral difficulty by which he was confronted. Among conditions which afforded him no guidance in conduct or in composition, what was the best model to follow in art and in life? (p. 345)

He then goes on to comment on the classical model chosen for Arnold's poetry:

If scholar and poet combine, as they did in Arnold, the result is the creative effort of a living reproduction. Though the materials are classic, and therefore second-hand, the poet's treatment of them is original. Yet no strength of imagination can turn the world's sympathies back to the alien shores of ancient Greece, and so long as Arnold remained true to his aesthetic theory, the circle of his readers was necessarily limited in its range. No one knew better than Arnold himself that to seek subjects exclusively in the past is to evade the conditions under which alone great poetry is possible. Verse inspired by bygone days can never earn the praise of adequacy. Poetry is only adequate when it expresses the grandest views that are possible concerning man and his destiny, respecting his relations with the world above him and around him. (p. 349)¹²

Prothero's assessment is extremely astute and points to the main flaw in Arnold's theory--a classical subject-matter was not the means by which to produce an adequate poetry for the age.

Poetry in the classical tradition, 'inspired by bygone days', is a 'refuge' and an 'evasion', or at best in Arnold's eyes, it is the means to a limited perfection by at least maintaining standards of poetic practice. Yet even if we accept Arnold's theory as intended mainly as a corrective to the defects of contemporary poetry, by offering an alternative tradition to that of the Romantics, it still cannot be adequately justified. It does not develop poetry, but rather petrifies it to the perfection of an earlier age.

Arnold, I believe, realized that his poetic theory could not in practice produce the kind of poetry which he desired. The 'pragmatic' poetry of the ancient Greeks was both aesthetically adequate and adequate as a 'criticism of life'. Arnold consistently argued for this fusion of properties in poetry, but it was evident that the more perfect his poetry became, in terms of 'Greek poetical forms' (Preface to Merope), the less effective it became as a pragmatic criticism of modern life, and it is noticeable that Arnold turned more and more to prose to express this criticism of life.

In his Preface (1853) he wrote:

He who possesses the discipline I speak of . . . will not, however, maintain a hostile attitude towards the false pretensions of his age: he will content himself with not being overwhelmed by them. He will esteem himself fortunate if he can succeed in banishing from his mind all feelings of contradiction, and irritation, and impatience; in order to delight himself with the contemplation of some noble action of a heroic time, and to enable others through his representation of it, to delight in it also. (CPW I, 14)

Arnold's intention was to find a discipline which would allow the poet and the man to maintain a state of equilibrium, to stand disinterested and detached amid the bewildering confusion of the times. But the actual result of such a discipline when applied to poetry was isolation from reality.

B. BROWNING'S CRITICISM OF ARNOLD'S THEORY

I have dealt with Arnold at length because I have been using him as a representative of those poets who chose subjects remote from their age. Arnold's theory illustrates that such a choice does not necessarily indicate a weak inability to face the actual conditions of Victorian life, what Leavis called 'a protest of withdrawal'. The reasons for this withdrawal are often rather more complex and positive than a simple 'protest' against the actual world. In looking at Arnold's theory I think it is clear that the motives for choosing subjects from past ages, and the use made of such subjects, will vary from poet to poet, depending on how each poet interprets, and reacts to, the contemporary conditions of life and of poetry surrounding him. Arnold, then, is representative only in a most general way: his ideas are not typical of all poets who write of subjects remote from contemporary reality. However, Browning's main objections to Arnold's theory basically apply to all poetry which seeks to escape reality, even if this escape is, as in Arnold's case, intended to allow art to make a positive contribution to life. Although as I stated earlier in the chapter, Browning's criticisms of the

subject-matter of escape concentrate on Arnold, I shall also point out instances where Browning seems to be referring specifically to other poets.

Arnold's theory has received special attention because it is, as Browning recognized, a serious and important challenge to his own theory of poetry. I emphasize the words serious and important; it is not difficult to find faults and weaknesses in Arnold's theory, and to demonstrate that Browning was aware of these faults and weaknesses and criticized them thoroughly in several of his poems, but Browning also agreed with Arnold on many important points, and where he disagreed he recognized the value of the thought behind the imperfect theory. What I mean by this will become clearer when I examine the Arnold-Browning debate through a study of Browning's poems, especially the crucial Aristophanes' Apology.

What I would like to suggest is that while Browning seized upon the obvious flaws in Arnold's classical theory, and presented arguments which have much in common with several other critics of classicism, he also saw the much broader issues behind Arnold's advocacy of a classical subject-matter, and his debate with Arnold became a debate on the great fundamental questions of poetry. How does poetry relate to life? How does the poet serve society? What is the nature of poetry--is it constant or variable? Can one reconcile a pragmatic and an aesthetic theory of poetry? In an unpoetical age, can poetry serve both the age and itself? Like Arnold, Browning felt that the Romantic tradition was not adequate or appropriate for the Victorian age, and that poetry had to be freshly related to the world. In effect, I believe that Browning recognized Arnold's theory as a major attempt to reassess poetry, and

it is because of this that Arnold's poetic criticism attracted Browning's particular attention.

In The Poetry of Browning, Philip Drew writes that, 'it is important to remember the extent of the common ground between Browning and Arnold. They agreed on a point which would not be generally conceded today--that the important thing about a poem is what it has to say, that poetry is important in the sense that it has implications beyond itself and beyond the action of the poem, and that it can affect the world' (pp. 355-56). This comment can be enlarged. First, the common ground between Browning and Arnold is characteristic of mid-Victorian poetic criticism in general: as I argued in Chapter One, an important feature of this poetic criticism is its broad perspective, its refusal to view a poem narrowly as an aesthetic entity completely detached from real life. Secondly, I believe that this common ground between Browning and Arnold can be extended to include the idea that both Browning and Arnold regard poetry as a criticism of life, or as an interpretation of life. In other words, their poetic theories reflect the ways in which they view and understand life. This is an important point and explains why the debate between Browning and Arnold involves so much more than the poet's choice of subject-matter.

Leonard Burrows in Browning the Poet (1969), discusses the fundamental differences between Browning's and Arnold's upbringing and attitude to life.¹³ In Arnold's attitude to Browning he observes something of 'the gentlemanly Oxonian for uncivilized barbarians' (p. 8). In effect, Burrows suggests that Browning and Arnold represent two broadly conflicting visions of life which cannot be reconciled, and which, to a large extent, are reflected in the different concepts of poetry which Browning and Arnold adopt.

Arnold requires that the world be structured: a discipline, an idea, must be imposed upon it so that man can live his life within an ordered scheme of the universe. Browning's concept of life resembles Clough's idea of the poet who fixes a centre around which the chaos of life is ordered. In Pauline (1833), Browning's poet expresses the idea of:

Existing as a centre to all things,
 Most potent to create and rule and call
 Upon all things to minister to it;
 And to a principle of restlessness
 Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all--
 This is myself.

(274-79)

In Browning's view, life is essentially ordered by the individual. Man does not live his life according to some fixed idea which finds no response within himself and for which he feels no personal commitment. This is not a prescription for anarchy, but there is 'a principle of restlessness', an acceptance of change and of constant reassessment. In The Ring and the Book Pompilia and Caponsacchi defy established authority only after they have proved or instinctively appreciated that the order, the rule, cannot be applied to their situation.

For Browning the abstract idea is constantly tested by its application and contribution to life. This is reflected in his poetics. In the Preface to the First Edition of Paracelsus (1835) Browning considers the rules of drama and says, 'the peculiar advantages they hold out are really such only so long as the purpose for which they were at first instituted is kept in view'. He goes on to say: 'I do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem, wherein all those restrictions only submitted to on account of compensating good in the original scheme are scrupulously retained, as though for some special

fitness in themselves' (my emphasis). Browning will not accept an idea because it is a neatly ordered idea; he will only accept it if it is relevant to the world in which he lives, or to the poem which he desires to write.

In a letter to Clough, circa 1848-49, Arnold writes that 'Browning is a man with a moderate gift passionately desiring movement and fulness, and obtaining but a confused multitudinousness'. He associates Browning with poets who 'will not be patient neither understand that they must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness'.¹⁴ Arnold feels that Browning loses himself in the multitudinousness of life; that he fails to create order out of its confusion and variety. Arnold believes that in his modern age criticism is necessary to shape this confusion before the poet can use it as material suitable for poetry. But Browning seeks to accept the multitudinousness of life, and as a poet he exists 'as a centre to all things', as the point of order, the controlling force. It is his vision, his conception, which shapes and makes significant the various and seemingly trivial or ugly facts of life.

In some ways, Browning achieves in his poetry the 'criticism of life' which Arnold found he could only express adequately in prose. In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864) Arnold argues for a 'disinterestedness', and says that 'the free play of the mind upon all subjects [is] a pleasure in itself' which 'nourish[es] us in growth toward perfection' (CPW III, 268, 284). This is what Browning accomplishes in his finest poems, and it is this 'free play of the mind upon all subjects' (even seemingly unpoetic ones) which is exactly the pleasure of his poetry. It is also the key to what Browning regards as the function or value of poetry: poetry nourishes man 'in growth toward

perfection' by enlarging his capacity for understanding and sympathy:

Learn, my gifted friend,
There are two things i' the world, still wiser folk
Accept--intelligence and sympathy.
(Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau (1871), 555-57)

I shall not examine the Browning-Arnold dispute chronologically.¹⁵ Browning's ripostes to Arnold are seldom explicit, and it is probable that there are a good many minor thrusts throughout Browning's work which must pass unnoticed. Also Browning has what E.B.B. called 'a habit of very subtle association' (Kintner I, 186-87), in that he blends together different ideas, different issues, or aspects of various characters or incidents, to create an original poem. E.B.B. is referring to Browning's mixing together 'things of likeness & unlikeness' in the finished poem itself, as for example in Sordello. I am suggesting something slightly different--a habit of very subtle association in the actual process of creating a poem.

Professor Drew in The Poetry of Browning observes that in the prefatory note to the Agamemnon of 1877 Browning 'still had in his mind the arguments that Arnold had put forward a quarter of a century before' (p. 361). I shall argue later that Browning possibly had other things in mind as well, but the fact that Browning should relate his translation back to a debate which originated so long ago demonstrates the fluidity of Browning's thought. This is important to my argument because I believe that Aristophanes' Apology (1875) is largely concerned with Browning's disputes with Arnold, and particularly looks back to Arnold's 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1869).

The Browning-Arnold debate, while it ranged more widely than is generally recognized,¹⁶ centred on subject-matter, and in particular on the question of whether poetry could be written about contemporary life.

Several of Browning's poems seem specifically directed to this question, and it is very clear that Browning rejects any notion that poetry which deals with contemporary subjects is necessarily inferior to poetry which deals with subjects from the past. In fact, as was shown in Chapter Two, he argues that a subject-matter which is chosen to avoid contact with reality halts the progress of poetry and of mankind.

It is important to make it clear that Browning does not mean to suggest that poets must write only of modern day subjects. I made this point at the beginning of the chapter, when I argued that Browning's disapproval of Tennyson's projected book on fairies was not based on a belief that poets should reflect the superficial reality of their times--the locomotives and steamships--but rather that they must keep pace with the changes in man's thoughts and feelings, with the way in which man views the world. This is Browning's main argument with Arnold, and with those poets who deliberately shun contact with the life of their age. I shall deal with this main argument first and examine later Browning's attitude to various other aspects of Arnold's theory of poetry.

I

The two central precepts of Arnold's theory--a limited perfection through the observance of 'regulative laws', and of following the traditions of a past culture to achieve an order lacking in his own time--directly oppose Browning's main ideas on poetry. As I have argued, the key concept in Browning's theory of poetry, and of life, is development, and particularly development through the action and effort of striving forward. For Browning 'perfection' is a sign of failure, since it implies that the process of development is complete (which is humanly

impossible), and so suggests sterility rather than true perfection and fulfilment.

This is what lies behind 'Andrea del Sarto, (called "The Faultless Painter")'. It is noticeable that Andrea's perfection is a perfection of technique, of draughtsmanship, and it is not unlike the limited perfection of form which Arnold seems to have accepted (see his letter to Mrs Forster quoted earlier). As the Preface to Paracelsus (1835) shows, Browning rejects the idea that artistic rules or conventions can in themselves ensure the creation of great art. Andrea can correct the 'fault . . . in the drawing's lines' of Raphael's picture but 'its soul is right, / He means right' (113-14). This can be related to 'Old Pictures in Florence' (XIX, 151-52) and to 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairesse' (VII, 173), and suggests that what Browning is actually saying is not that he despises the art of the realist, but that the body, the form or surface of poetry, is not as important as its soul or meaning--'its soul is right, / He means right'. In other words, the 'flowers' of poetry are not as important as its 'sap'.

It is not possible to say exactly when Browning wrote 'Old Pictures in Florence'. DeVane in his Handbook (p. 251) believes that it may have been written in March 1853. Arnold dated the composition of his Preface, 1 October 1853. This would seem to preclude the idea that Browning's poem is a direct reply to Arnold's Preface, but nevertheless the poem is a remarkable challenge to Arnold's views. Of the perfection of Greek statuary Browning says:

So, you saw yourself as you wished you were,
As you might have been, as you cannot be.
(XII)

Growth came when, looking your last on them all,
 You turned your eyes inwardly one fine day
 And cried with a start--What if we so small
 Be greater and grander the while than they?
 Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
 In both, of such lower types are we
 Precisely because of our wider nature;
 For time, theirs--ours, for eternity.

(XV)

To-day's brief passion limits their range
 (XVI)¹⁷

Greek art presents a perfection man cannot attain and so stunts true growth by imposing upon him a visible ultimate perfection alien to his being. Growth comes with the actual examination of man himself, with the realization of his imperfections, and hence of his infinite possibilities. 'We are faulty--why not? we have time in store. / The Artificer's hand is not arrested / With us' (XVI).

The implication of this is that Browning rejects all ideal visions of man and of life. He rejects any poetic false beautification of life, and this applies to medieval subject-matter as well as classical subject-matter. It is noticeable that Browning's medieval and Renaissance poems do not glorify the period or the people. Browning's Childe Roland is no Sir Galahad. In his 'Essay on Shelley' he wrote of 'beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection' (p. 71). Clearly this does much to explain Browning's attitude to Greek art.

The perfection of Greek art is not a celebration of man's divine destiny but a reproach to his humanity: 'Earth here, rebuked by Olympus there' (XII). This is very close to a passage on Greek statuary in Hazlitt's 'On Poetry in General':

They are marble to the touch and to the heart. They have not an informing principle within them. In their faultless excellence they appear sufficient to themselves. By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of passion or suffering. By their beauty they are deified. But they are not objects of religious faith to us, and their forms are a reproach to common humanity.¹⁸

These kinds of criticisms of Greek culture were common in the period. For example, in 1849 Coventry Patmore wrote that, 'It is a mistake . . . to suppose that [art's] highest and fittest . . . [object], is the direct representation of beauty.' This he says was an idea of pagan art. 'Beauty is one among the many realities which Art now grasps' ('The Ethics of Art', p. 447). Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a letter of 1886, wrote, 'Of course I agree with the rest of the world in admiring its beauty. Above everything else the Greeks excelled in art: now their mythology was the earliest of their arts that have in any way survived'. 'But mythology is something else besides fairy-tale: it is religion, the historical part of religion.' This he condemns because, 'First it is as history untrue. What is untrue history? Nothing and worse than nothing. And that history religion? Still worse.'¹⁹ As these general criticisms demonstrate, Greek art, while admired for its aesthetic beauty, is condemned for its failure to reflect reality and truth. The criticism of Browning, Patmore, and Hopkins is that Greek art is limited: it is an art of the past which does not, and cannot, reflect the historical progress of man.

Browning's 'Old Pictures in Florence' gathers together several of the common criticisms against Greek art and shapes them into a concise argument which centres on development:

'Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven--
The better! What's come to perfection perishes.
(XVII)

No single age can produce a definitive art which will satisfy all of mankind for all time.²⁰

It is true that we are now, and shall be hereafter,
But what and where depend on life's minute?
(XVIII)

Browning's question is rhetorical. In his view man changes from minute to minute, age to age. To stop at Greek art is to choose 'an eternal petrification' of mankind.

In the argument concerning development, stanza XIX is crucial:

On which I conclude, that the early painters,
To cries of 'Greek Art and what more wish you?'--
Replied, 'To become now self-acquainters,
And paint man man, whatever the issue!
Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,
New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:
To bring the invisible full into play!
Let the visible go to the dogs--what matters?'

The emphasis is on truth, and in particular human truth, 'paint man man'. The main point is that development in art corresponds to a development in man himself.²¹ The new art expresses a change in man's vision and ideas, 'make new hopes shine', 'new fears aggrandize'. Hence for Browning, 'the first of the new, in our race's story, / Beats the last of the old' (XX).

The world must be constantly reinterpreted with increasing subtlety and greater perceptiveness. As he says in his 'Essay on Shelley', 'For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilized, but the raw material it operates upon, must remain' (p. 67). However this is not all that different from Arnold's statement that 'the inevitable task for the modern poet henceforth is,--

as it was for the Greek poet in the days of Pericles . . . to interpret human life afresh, and to supply a new spiritual basis to it' ('On the Study of Celtic Literature' (1866, CPW III, 381). Also, in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), Arnold, like Browning, most definitely connects the future of poetry with the future of mankind (see the quotation on p. 233). But there is a crucial difference between Arnold and Browning, and it is a difference which reflects the basic general criticism of Greek art discussed earlier: Classical art cannot satisfy modern man because it does not reflect the historical progress of man.

Browning quite clearly argues that poetry must continually make 'this world' the 'starting point and basis' of its creation: poetry must not throw the world aside and work upon previous interpretations. While Arnold accepts that the modern poet must 'interpret human life afresh', he is willing to make do with an interpretation from an earlier analogous culture.

A crucial flaw in Arnold's classical theory of poetry is this lack of an historical awareness, a failure to take account of the centuries separating Greek life from modern life. Pater adds just this historical awareness to Arnold's theory, and by doing so reveals that the pragmatic and objective aspects of Arnold's theory are dubious and superficial. Arnold's devotion to classical culture is at its core subjective and aesthetic--a purely personal attraction to the qualities of the particular culture. Pater changes the first step in criticism from Arnold's 'to see the object as in itself it really is' ('Function of Criticism', 1864, CPW III, 258), to 'to know one's impression as it really is'.

In his conclusion to the Renaissance (1873) he writes: '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' (Works I, 235). In effect Pater denies the feasibility of one of Arnold's key ideas in his critical theory--that one can establish 'an infallible touchstone', an absolute or 'real estimate' of a work of art. In 'The Study of Poetry', in which these phrases occur, Arnold believes that he can overcome both a personal and an historical critical evaluation of art.²² Pater believes that a personal response is the only response possible.

Arnold's lack of an historical attitude is also evident in his understanding of Greek culture: it is an idealized vision which fails to see the imperfections and inadequacies inherent in that culture. G.H. Lewes in the Leader (1853) noted that Arnold 'maintains opinions respecting the Greek and Latin poets, which are traditional, but which, to our experience, are very far removed from the truth'. Lewes goes on to make almost exactly the same case as Browning:

with whatever reverence and retrospective longing the Past is regarded, it should always be regarded as past: it should have historical, not absolute significance: it is our Ancestry, and not our Life. And as the retention in our organism of the elements which have lived is in itself a fatal source of destruction, poisoning the very life these elements once served, so in the onward progression of Humanity the old elements must pass away transmitting to successors the work they had to perform.²³

What Lewes suggests here is that Arnold's concept of Greek culture is mythical rather than historical, ideal rather than true.

From an historical perspective Arnold's key points about subject-matter become suspect. 'A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting . . . than a small human action of to-day.'

'Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido,--what modern poem presents personages as interesting, even to us moderns, as these personages of

an "exhausted past"?' The most excellent actions are those 'which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections' (Preface, 1853, CPW I, 4). Are these tenets true? Browning's criticism, and the criticism generally against a classical theory of poetry, suggests that modern man demands an art which will examine man and his world in its historical or factual reality. The implication of this is that the 'primary human affections' may not be evoked by the same means or by the same subjects, in every age.

Arnold stresses the larger than life mythical characters of the classical world, but Victorian literature (especially the novel) tended to concentrate on ordinary men and women rather than the superhuman hero. E.S. Dallas regards this as exactly the main division between antique and modern art:

Thus it appears that the withering of the hero and the flourishing of the private individual, which I have ventured to describe as being (for art at least) the most salient characteristic of our time, is but the last and most complete development of a tendency which belongs to modern art and literature more or less from their first dawn, and separates them, as by a great gulf, from the art, the literature, and the life antique.
(Gay Science II, 325-26)

Dallas' remarks can be related to H.B. Forman's assessment of modern literature in his review of Browning's The Ring and the Book in the London Quarterly Review (1869). An added interest of this review is that it also seems to attack Arnold's Preface of 1853. Forman writes:

The day has long gone by when heroism meant pugilism, and the might of man was measured by magnitude of muscle. Breadth of mind and width of heart come first now, and the largest action is not that which covers the greatest area and deploys the largest aggregate of physical powers, but that which involves most disinterestedness, philanthropy, purity of heart, power of thought--in short, the maximum of intellectual and moral force. For such a display, one set of modern men and women serves as well as another for types. (p. 357)

Forman regards Browning as the leader of the 'Psychological School of poetry' which, he says, 'has a wide applicability to the idealization of the intellectual and emotional phases of being which, in modern city life, are so intensified as to preponderate immensely in importance over the life of physical activity' (p. 330). Forman links this new poetry with the novel. Both poet and novelist are working on 'quite new principles in the technical procedures of literature' and are 'intimately connected with modern ideas' (p. 330). This echoes Browning's own views on the relationship between the development of poetry and the development of man; poetry must change as man's perception of truth changes, as his ideas change.

Dallas also associates the movement from antique to modern with an increased interest in the novel. He illustrates his ideas on the flourishing of the individual by pointing to the great interest in biography, and says, 'a novel is but a fictitious biography' (II, 285). Dallas also notes the turning from historical painting to 'genre and landscape' (II, 324), and this can be related to Forman's observations on the turning from conventional epic to the modern schools of psychological and idyllic poetry. These remarks could be summed-up in Browning's stanza from 'Old Pictures in Florence' (quoted on p. 250). The interest has shifted from ideal, physical, and external representations, to an art which studies man as he is, and particularly which studies his 'intellectual and moral' nature.

Arnold does say that 'the date of an action . . . signifies nothing' and that the poet's 'business is with [the] inward man'. However, he finds the effects of 'the domestic epic dealing with the details of modern life' inferior to those produced by 'the later books of the Iliad, by the Oresteia, or by the episode of Dido. And why is this? Simply

because in the three last-named cases the action is greater, the personages nobler, the situations more intense.' The reasons given for the superiority of these classical works suggest an external view of life, a view of life which in 'Old Pictures in Florence' is rejected by modern man. Browning specifically says that 'growth came' with a turning from external appearance to a study of the inner man. He emphasizes the 'small', the 'lower types', the imperfect aspects of mankind as being those factors which paradoxically make us 'greater and grander' than the idealisations of classical art (for the full quotation of this stanza see p. 248).

As early as 1837 Browning declared that his interest was in 'Action in Character, rather than Character in Action' (Preface to Strafford). In his preface to Paracelsus (1835) he said that he aimed to present an internal drama, with little 'recourse to an external machinery of incidents', and in his dedication to Sordello (1863) he wrote that 'the historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay in the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study'. Browning's business is clearly with the 'inward man' and because of this 'the date of an action', in his case, really is of no special importance.

Beverly Taylor in 'Browning and Victorian Medievalism' writes: 'Browning demonstrated in his own works that a poet can record modern values and universal human experience in a historical or legendary context' (p. 60). This is true because the setting of the subject is never allowed to become the primary interest of the poem. The difference in attitude between Browning and his contemporaries to a subject set in 'a historical or legendary context' emerges most clearly in a letter to Isa Blagden about Tennyson's The Holy Grail and Other Poems. He writes:

We look at the object of art in poetry so differently! Here is an Idyll about a knight being untrue to his friend and yielding to the temptation of that friend's mistress after having engaged to assist him in his suit. I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe the castle, and the effect of the moon on its towers, and anything but the soul. The monotony, however, you must expect--if the new is to be of a piece with the old. Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always--but a weariness to me by this time. The lyrics were the 'first sprightly running'--this that follows [The Earthly Paradise] is a laboured brew with the old flavour but not body.
(Dearest Isa, p. 327 [19 January 1870])

The main argument of this letter is that neither Tennyson nor Morris has engaged himself with the 'proper subject' of poetry--the soul of man. They have created poems which concentrate on externals to produce the 'flavour' of a period--its picturesque scenes, or the style and manner of its poetry. Browning suggests there is no real substance to the poetry, no 'body' to the 'brew'. Browning often uses 'wine' as a metaphor for poetry, and when he does he describes his own 'wine' as strong rather than sweet (see, for example, the Epilogue to his Pacchiarotto volume, 1876).

In the poem 'Tray', in Dramatic Idyls [First Series] (1879), Browning writes:

Sing me a hero! Quench my thirst
Of soul, ye bards!

(1-2)

There are echoes here of the opening of Byron's Don Juan:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one.

A major theme of Browning's poem is this question of a true hero for the age. Browning argues that the poetry of 'flavour', in past styles

on past subjects, does not satisfy the modern thirst, the 'thirst / Of soul'. Browning mocks the stilted language and conventional heroes of Victorian-Medieval poetry, and from the third stanza onwards the poem contrasts sharply with this kind of poetry.

The main body of the poem begins by concerning itself not with a medieval knight but with 'a beggar-child'. This immediately arouses the interest of the imaginary listener: '(let's hear this third!)'. The scene also contrasts strikingly with the often elaborate medieval or Romantic settings richly described by Byron, Tennyson, Morris, or Rossetti. The child, '"Sat on a quay's edge"'. The diction is plain, and the narrator presents the story in a most economical way, again in contrast to the leisurely circumlocution of the Victorian Medievalists.

'Bystanders reason, think of wives
And children ere they risk their lives.
Over the balustrade has bounced
A mere instinctive dog, and pounced
Plumb on the prize.'

(16-20)

The hero and his great action--a dog which saves a beggar-child from drowning--are rattled off in a few lines. Moreover, the topic of the poem could hardly be more up-to-date or down-to-earth--vivisection. DeVane suggests that Browning founded his poem upon an actual incident, (Handbook, p. 441), which again is in contrast to those poets who prefer mythical or legendary subjects.

'Tray' has generally been regarded as a rather inferior poem. DeVane feels that 'the Dramatic Idyls have a unity in theme and form, save for the poem Tray which should hardly have been given place' (Handbook, p. 430). He regards the poem as being sentimental: 'The poet's sympathy for animals assuredly does his heart credit, but in the light of the history of modern medicine one must think that he had a

short view of the matter' (pp. 441-42). Whether 'Tray' is good or bad is of some importance because Browning opens the poem by claiming that this poem, with its modern interests, its dog-hero, its plain diction and colloquial speech, is more satisfying than the colourful epics of poets like Tennyson and Morris. 'Tray' is also a challenge to Arnold's Preface (1853):

A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting . . . than a smaller human action of to-day, even though . . . [the latter] has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interests. (CPW I, 4)

'Tray' is not concerned with a 'great' subject, and its subject and themes (vivisection, issues arising from the debate in the Nineteenth Century on the soul and future life,²⁴ the merits of Victorian-Medieval or Romantic poetry) are unmistakably contemporary.

Is 'Tray' as interesting as Sohrab and Rustum, The Earthly Paradise, or The Idylls of the King, or is its appeal, as Arnold implies, based purely on 'transient feelings and interests', the superficial pleasures of reading a poem written in contemporary language on contemporary topics? It is somewhat ironic that Arnold and Browning are essentially making the same point--inferior poetry is poetry in which the pleasures and interests come from the superficial elements of the poem and not from its content or total impression. But the two men come to completely opposite conclusions when they state this general opinion in more practical and precise terms about subject-matter. In 'Dramatic Idyls: The Case Law of Extremity', John Woolford does much to show that 'Tray' is a much richer poem than DeVane thought; and that the simplicity and plainness of the action, and of the whole presentation of the poem, hide

a complexity of meaning and significance as fit to 'quench thirst / Of soul' as a poem with a 'great and passionate' subject.

Woolford argues that 'Tray' is part of the general motif of the volume: 'in every case, one or more of the characters is presented with a choice between life for himself and death for another; and upon that choice depends his moral future' (p. 20). I would also argue that another general motif is judgment, and it is a judgment to be executed by the reader. Like The Ring and the Book, the subject of judgment in the poem relates to the final judgment outside the poem by the reader. What I am suggesting is that Browning's poem minimizes spectacle, colourful description, and great action, which generally leave the reader in the role of a spectator observing the externals of life. The interest of Browning's poem is the emotions, thoughts, and moral values of man, and the reader is not a spectator, but an essential part of the creation of the total experience of the poem. Browning shifts the emphasis of poetry from physical spectacle, with the reader external to the action of the poem, to insight into the 'soul' of a subject, with the reader involved in the act of creating the poem, of experiencing the poet's conception of the subject.

The spectacle of Tray jumping in to save a child and then jumping in again to rescue a doll is not all that we are meant to see. In stanza 4 the child falls into the river with people standing-by. 'You the standers-by' suggests the verb 'to stand-by' with its meaning of 'to be ready', 'to be on the alert'. Also 'to stand-by' someone means to support, to offer help in time of need. The terse sentence, 'None stirred' implies that the standers-by have failed the test of life: at the moment when they were asked to make the crucial decision to risk their own lives in order to help another human being they did not act.

They become in Browning's poem 'bystanders'--spectators. It should be noticed that this theme, the theme of standing on the alert and being ready to act, is the theme of the two opening stanzas on Sir Olaf and the hero who has his 'eye wide ope as though Fate beckoned'.

In his article, Woolford draws attention to the contrast between 'a mere instinctive dog' and the 'Bystanders [who] reason'. The word 'reason' is used throughout the poem (16, 31 and 39). Woolford notes that 'The heroic instinct (Tray is 'my hero' for Browning) is opposed to the rational calculation, and implicitly vindicated' (p. 23). He quotes lines 38-45 and goes on:

Reason, after refusing the heroic, seeks to analyse-- which will destroy it. Reason is tainted. The precision of 'half-an-hour and eighteen-pence' implicates it in the nice calculations of the cash nexus ('Time is money') as opposed to the generosity of the dog's bounce. The very redundancy of the rescue of the doll becomes a redemptive protest against such existential haggling. (pp. 23-24)

There is also an element here of what Woolford observes in the Idyls generally: 'the right action needs no rhetorical framework . . . to act in a way that will need justification is to act wrongly' (p. 25). The bystanders justify their inaction by reason, and they proudly claim that it is reason which distinguishes man from all other creatures-- 'Reason reigns / In man alone'. But I feel there is also a suggestion that it is reason which alienates man from all other creatures, including his fellow human beings. The beggar-child is said to be 'like a bird' and she is 'at careless play': she is not part of the calculating reasoning human world, but is rather part of the larger world of nature. It is her bond with nature that saves her since it is 'a mere instinctive dog' which rescues her and not the reasoning bystanders.

The real interest of the poem is not the heroic action, the deed

itself, but the motivation for the action. The act and the actor, and the setting of the poem, are of no real consequence. The interest is in 'the infinite moment'; a moment in which matters of eternal consequence may be decided and revealed. Browning presents heroism as being instinctive and instantaneous. It cannot be understood by science or reason. But surely this was more or less clear by stanza 4: the next five stanzas only emphasize the point by telling us how the dog dives again for a doll and how the men of reason seek to understand 'why he dived' by the vivisection of the heroic animal. I believe that these additional five stanzas give a further dimension to the poem.

Arnold states in his Preface that the poet's 'business is with [the] inward man; with their feelings and behaviour in certain tragic situations . . . these have in them nothing local and casual'. The situation in 'Tray' tests the human behaviour of the bystanders and it is not merely a test of heroism but a test of soul, a test of the 'inward man'. The bystanders mock the dog because he does not distinguish between the child and the doll, but in fact neither do they. They no more act to save a child than they would to rescue a doll (and the point is emphasized in that when Tray dives for the second time, they do think that there may be 'another child to save').

I do not believe that vivisection is introduced simply because Browning was an anti-vivisectionist--this would indeed be to bring a local and casual situation before the reader. The concluding stanzas add a sharp and bitter irony to the poem. It is the brain which is generally regarded as being the seat of reason, therefore the vivisection of Tray's brain could not reveal why he dived, since his act was instinctive, not reasoned. The suggestion that Tray should undergo vivisection is in itself a comment upon this kind of reasoning and upon

the souls of such men. The concluding line, 'How brain secretes dog's soul, we'll see!', turns back upon the poem so that what we see is that Browning's poem is in fact a 'vivisection' of the brains of the bystanders, which has indeed revealed to us their souls. The important phrase, 'Reason reigns / In man alone' (33-34), can take on a different meaning when read in the context of the poem as a whole. Reason reigns, or dominates, in those men who live isolated by selfishness.

In The Ring and the Book there is a similar exploration of instinct and reason. Browning does not praise one over the other, but he does argue that there must be a balance. Reason must not be used to pervert what is instinctively known to be right and true. Caponsacchi instantly recognizes the truth about Pompilia (VI, 931-34), and knows that reason and thought cannot be applied to his situation (VI, 937-44), but he still reasons himself into a delay before eventually acting:

'Duty is still
Wisdom: I have been wise.' So the day wore
(VI, 1053-54)

Even so the Pope describes him in terms which remind one of Tray:

My athlete on the instant, gave such good
Great undisguised leap over post and pale
Right into the mid-cirque.
(X, 1140-42)

He goes on to criticize those who should have acted but stood by aloof:

Where were the men-at-arms with cross on coat?
Aloof, bewraying their attire: whilst thou
In mask and motley, pledged to dance not fight,
Sprang'st forth the hero!
(X, 1165-68)

The resemblance to the whole situation in 'Tray' is striking, and the theme of balancing right reason with true instinct is also a major theme

in The Ring and the Book.²⁵

'Tray' is not, in my view, a feeble challenge to those poets who felt that contemporary subjects could not provide an interest or satisfaction comparable to subjects drawn from the past. While, as DeVane suggests, the poem seems to be particularly directed at Byron, Tennyson, Morris, and Rossetti (Handbook, p. 441), it also acts as a criticism of Arnold's views. The opening demand for poets to 'Quench my thirst / Of soul', the basis in fact rather than myth or legend, and particularly the concentration on depth of vision rather than breadth, connects 'Tray' to the 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairese' (Browning's parleying with Matthew Arnold).

DeVane in his Browning's Parleyings recognizes this parleying as being in the main a discussion between Browning and Arnold on the best subject-matter for poetry. He writes: 'by precept as well as by practice Arnold is on the opposite side from Browning on this question of the proper subject for poetry' (p. 237). But again I feel that Browning's target is wider, that he is making a general statement about poetry which rejects the subject-matter of 'this world'.²⁶ However, the main target is unmistakably Arnold. DeVane says that 'the most salient characteristic of Lairese . . . is his insistence upon the beauty and perfection of the classic antique, contrasted with the sordidness and "deformed ugliness" of the modern subject' (p. 218). This makes him an ideal parallel to Arnold.

In the Art of Painting Lairese takes his pupils on an imaginary walk to show them the ideal and the horrible in landscape; Browning questions the findings of this walk by taking a walk of his own and making rather different observations. I believe that Browning also has Arnold's 'Resignation' in mind. 'Resignation', like Browning's

'Parleying', involves a walk, both poems criticize the attitude to life held by a friend, and both deal with the kind of vision the poet should apply to life. In particular Arnold's statement, 'Not deep the poet sees, but wide' (214), seems to receive a specific answer in Browning's exclamation:

If we no longer see as you of old,
'Tis we see deeper. Progress for the bold!
You saw the body, 'tis the soul we see.
(VII)

The whole theme of the 'Parleying', with its forceful cry for progress and active striving, opposes the idea of 'resignation', of passiveness.

The lines quoted above form the core of the poem's argument. The modern poet no longer needs to invent visual forms to express and explain the nature of man, because he can see deeper, the Earth is not a 'surface-blank' needing the power of fancy to give it life and significance. Browning describes himself as one,

Who, bee-like, sate sense with the simply true,
Nor seek to heighten that sufficiency
By help of feignings proper to the page--
Earth's surface-blank whereon the elder age
Put colour, poetizing--poured rich life
On what were else a dead ground--nothingness--
Until the solitary world grew rife
With Joves and Junos, nymphs and satyrs.
(V)

The debate revolves around this question of what is the correct poetic vision, and Browning's key argument is that because of modern man's increased depth of vision, man is now satisfied with 'the simply true'. Browning says,

I who myself contentedly abide
Awake, nor want the wings of dream,--who tramp
Earth's common surface, rough, smooth, dry or damp,
--I understand alternatives.
(V)

Browning understands alternatives, but rejects them. For Browning it is not a case of beauty or truth, but of beauty and truth. The lines quoted above are similar to what he writes in 'Pisgah-Sights I'

(Pacchiarotto, 1876):

How I see all of it
Life there, outlying!
Roughness and smoothness,
Shine and defilement,
Grace and uncouthness:
One reconcilment.

'One reconcilment' is Browning's aim, not the choice between alternatives. Looking back at the lines from 'De Lairesse', I feel that there is a double meaning in the phrase, 'nor want the wings of dream'. Browning does not lack the 'wings of dream', the poetic fancy, but he does not need them 'to heighten [the] sufficiency' of 'the simply true'.

Although I do not believe that there is any specific relation between section VI of 'De Lairesse' and Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), there are important general points of comparison between the two works. Section VI, like 'The Study of Poetry', begins by setting poetry in the context of the divisions between earth and heaven, soul and sense. 'There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve'. In 'De Lairesse', Browning observes that 'the chain which used to bind / Our earth to heaven' has 'snapt'.

Arnold goes on to account for this loss of religious faith by saying that because we made our belief completely dependent upon our religion being factually true, we lost both our intellectual and our emotional faith when the facts upon which religion was based were proved

false. Browning asks 'which was it of the links / Snapt first', 'Is mind to blame, / Or sense,--does that usurp, this abdicate?'. Is it reason or feeling which denies or accepts belief? Browning and Arnold come to very similar conclusions. There must be a 'reconcilement' of soul and sense, and the reconciliation must be achieved by a poetry which unites emotional or spiritual belief with intellectual belief. Arnold writes: 'Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact'. What exactly he means by this is not clear, but the word 'idea' has the same function in Arnold's resolution of the problem as 'fact unseen' has in Browning's. It is this different attitude to 'fact' which is the source of Browning's dispute with Arnold.

'The Study of Poetry' is the essay in which Arnold most clearly associates the future of poetry with the future of mankind. The theme of 'progress' is also a major concern in 'De Lairesse'. As 'De Lairesse' makes clear, Browning is fully aware of the pragmatic reasons for Arnold's use of 'Fancy's rainbow-birth / Conceived 'mid clouds in Greece' (VI). He writes:

The reason was, fancy composed the strife
 'Twixt sense and soul: for sense, my De Lairesse,
 Cannot content itself with outward things,
 Mere beauty: soul must needs know whence there springs--
 How, when and why--what sense but loves, nor lists
 To know at all.

(V)

Browning realizes that 'fancy', by the 'poetizing' of reality, composes the strife between soul and sense.

Again there is a difficulty in interpreting exactly what Browning means, but from the context it would seem that 'sense' means something like the aesthetic or sensual faculty, and 'soul' means both intellectual and spiritual insight. In 'Tray' it is the reasoning of the bystanders

which reveals their souls, just as it is the instinct of Tray which reveals his. I take it that for Browning 'soul' includes both man's reason or mind, and his instinctive or spiritual nature or insight. In stanza VI of 'De Lairese' 'soul' becomes 'mind'. 'Sense' seeks more than beauty: it seeks an aesthetic perfection of form and content. Hence we do

not see flowers and weeds
Simply as such, but link with each and all
The ultimate perfection--what we call
Rightly enough the human shape divine.

(VI)

But 'soul' demands a satisfaction of the intellect and spirit; the kind of satisfaction that Greek mythology, as a religion, provided for Greek art.

The religious myths united the intellectual and spiritual requirement of man (the 'How, when and why') with an art which was aesthetically perfect. But this union was accomplished by 'fancy', not fact; by an imaginative explanation of what otherwise was 'Earth's surface-blank', 'a dead ground--nothingness'. Arnold's statement that 'the idea is the fact' in poetry suggests that what he was attempting to achieve in his theory of poetry was just this synthesis of sense and soul, of aesthetic and pragmatic theories. The phrase, 'the idea is the fact', is a way of expressing the kind of imaginative interpretation of life which the Greeks achieved in their union of art and religion.

Browning rejects this use of fancy to interpret life. The idea is not enough. It is not enough to impose an order upon the world: the order must be inherent in the reality of life. De Lairese's chain between heaven and earth remains intact only because he is blind and cannot see reality ('and yet for you, since blind, / Subsisted still

efficient and intact', my emphasis). By implication, Browning is suggesting that Arnold's healing of the breach between sense and soul is accomplished only by ignoring contemporary reality and by retaining a vision of a past world. 'Plain retrogression, this!' (VII) Browning speaks for the modern poet:

Oh, we can fancy too! but somehow fact
Has got to--say, not so much push aside
Fancy, as to declare its place supplied
By fact unseen, but no less fact the same,
Which mind bids sense accept.

(VI)

You saw the body, 'tis the soul we see.

(VII)

Browning makes several points here. First, he stresses progression, and particularly a development of vision from externals to internals, from body to soul. Secondly, 'Earth's surface-blank' no longer has to be given a fancied significance: fancy is to be replaced 'by fact unseen'. Because man can now see deeper, beneath the 'surface' to the 'soul', he can find a meaning and a beauty in reality where earlier artists could see only 'a dead ground'. Thirdly, where the classical artist had to find a way of making soul accept 'what sense but loves', the modern artist realizes that it is the 'mind [which] bids sense accept' the 'fact unseen'. In other words, as Arnold recognized, modern poetry is concerned primarily with 'an intellectual deliverance', and Browning suggests that the aesthetic sense will have to accept this primacy of mind over sense.

This resembles the argument of 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' on the necessity of the 'sap / Of prose-experience' over 'flowers,--mere words' (488-89, 497). For Browning, 'the strife / 'Twixt sense and soul' can only be healed by recognizing and accepting change. He implies, as his own art

demonstrates, that the way in which man now apprehends truth necessitates changes in what is understood by poetry. 'Mind bids sense accept' rather than vice versa: poetry is now to be dominated by its truth to reality rather than its beauty of form and expression.

Browning's attitude exactly corresponds with what E.B.B. wrote on 20 March 1845:

I am inclined to think that we want new forms . . . as well as thoughts. The old gods are dethroned. Why should we go back to the antique moulds . . . classical moulds, as they are so improperly called? If it is a necessity of Art to do so, why then those critics are right who hold that Art is exhausted and the world too worn out for poetry. I do not, for my part, believe this: & I believe the so-called necessity of Art to be the mere feebleness of the artist. Let us all aspire to Life--& let the dead bury their dead. If we have but courage to face these conventions, to touch this low ground, we shall take strength from it instead of losing it; & of that, I am intimately persuaded. For there is poetry everywhere. (Kintner I, 43)

At the end of 'De Lairese' Browning sums up his views:

Let things be--not seem,
I counsel rather,--do, and nowise dream!
Earth's young significance is all to learn:
The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn
Where who seeks fire finds ashes--
(XIV)

The tone and the views expressed recall E.B.B.'s letter and also Browning's poem 'Cleon'. Browning concludes 'De Lairese' by noting that the Greek philosophy of life cannot overcome the fact of death. 'Sad school / Was Hades!' (XIV). The quarrel with Arnold widens from aesthetic to philosophic and religious matters. The importance of poetry for Arnold and Browning is exactly that it is a 'criticism of life'.

Poetry cannot be a 'criticism of life' if it is self-enclosed.

It cannot 'begin with an Idea of the world', and operate within the confines of regulations and laws established to meet the needs of a culture long past, and be, what Arnold himself demands it be, 'the most adequate interpretation of [the present] age' ('On the Modern Element in Literature', CPW I, 22). It is apparent that Arnold and Browning start at opposite ends of a problem. Browning works from the particular to the general, Arnold works from the general to the particular.

The essential for Arnold is to have an Idea of the world--this is his starting point. In the 'Parleying with Francis Furini' Browning writes:

Well, my attempt to make the cloud disperse
 Begins--not from above but underneath:
 I climb, you soar,--who soars soon loses breath
 And sinks, who climbs keeps one foot firm on fact
 Ere hazarding the next step

(X)

For Browning, the subject-matter and form of poetry must be determined by the reality of the times in which it is written if it is to be part of the development of man. It is the 'one foot firm on fact' which makes progression possible, which allows man to hazard 'the next step'.

Browning makes these points clear in 'Cleon', which is recognized as being a specific criticism of Arnold's views.²⁷ Cleon is the epitome of Greek culture--'In brief, all arts are mine' (61). Cleon reasons out several of Browning's own beliefs, as for example his central idea of progress, 'Why stay we on the earth unless to grow?' (114). But the paradox of Cleon's achievements is that 'most progress is most failure' (272). Like the Greek statues in 'Old Pictures in Florence', the progress and the perfection attained are limited to external physical life. Ultimately Greek culture is pessimistic and

humanly unsatisfying since it cannot transcend the fact that breaks
Cleon's composure,

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

But more than this 'Cleon' illustrates the hopelessness and uselessness
of a culture, no matter how great, which shuts itself off from movements
in ordinary life.

Cleon's knowledge is ignorance: it has no roots in life but works
from 'ideas' of the world.

Paulus; we have heard his fame
Indeed, if Christus be not one with him--
I know not, nor am troubled much to know.
(340-42)

Thou wrongest our philosophy, O king,
In stooping to inquire of such an one,
As if his answer could impose at all!
(346-48)

'Stooping' indicates not only Cleon's pride but also Browning's own
idea that 'only by looking low, ere looking high, / Comes penetration
of the mystery' ('Parleying with Francis Furini', 546-47). It also
refers back to the 'secret shut from us' which may be Christ's teaching
that the meek shall inherit the earth. With all the attractions of his
genius and art, Cleon's teaching can reach no further than 'live long
and happy, and in that thought die' (336). The king is hardly 'well-
counselled'.

'Cleon' cannot be fully understood from an outline of its subject-
matter. This whole question about the central importance of the subject
or action of a poem was a major point of contention between Arnold and
Browning. In his Preface, Arnold rejected those subjects 'in which a

continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done' (CPW I, 3). For this reason Arnold says he rejects Empedocles on Etna, but these conditions are also true of the action of 'Cleon'. Browning uses 'Cleon' as a practical demonstration of the importance of treatment in poetry, and of the internal character of modern poetry. 'Cleon' is an excellent example of 'action in character' rather than 'character in action', of the advantages of the dramatic monologue over the epic.

The action derives from the conflicts within the character himself, and from the interplay between Cleon's limited understanding of his situation and the greater understanding of the reader. This allows Browning to maintain an unusually strong force of irony throughout the poem which creates a tension between Cleon's negative philosophy and culture and the positive emerging Christianity which he so tragically rejects. As this suggests, the action goes beyond the poem to involve the reader himself. Emotional sympathy is played against an objective rational appreciation of Cleon's position so that there is action or tension between what we feel and what we know. This is the art of the 'Maker-see'. We are made to see Cleon's predicament through Browning's use of the dramatic situation and poetic language. For example, notice how complex the effect is of Cleon's simple off-hand rejection, the climax of the poem,

I know not, nor am troubled much to know.

The falling emphasis of the sentence, and way in which it tails off, suggest his ennui, passivity, and weary arrogance. The negatives imply the whole emptiness of his philosophy in its want of positive attributes.

The superb balance of the sentence suggests his culture and his pride of intellect. The positionings of the word 'know', at the beginning and end, heighten the whole irony and tragedy of his 'knowledge'. There is a play between the trite phrase 'nor am troubled much to know', in the sense of 'I couldn't care less', and the real meaning of the words, the importance of which Cleon is blind to. The very thing that Cleon has been so troubled to know is thrown aside in a phrase charged with irony.

'Cleon' as a poem is both interesting and pleasurable, although its subject, according to Arnold's theory, should be merely painful. It is also unquestionably part of modern life, coming close to Arnold's own vision of poetry as a 'magister vitae', a poetry which will offer a criticism of life, an interpretation in human terms of the complexities of life. Yet as 'Cleon' makes clear, the content of a poem cannot be assigned only to the subject-matter. What the poem means and does depends as much upon the poet's vision and treatment of his subject as upon the subject itself. This point was demonstrated most clearly by Browning's transcription of The Agamemnon of Aeschylus (1877).

The Agamemnon is Browning's most curious contribution to the subject-matter debate. In a rather tongue-in-cheek manner, Browning says in his introduction:

Fortunately, the poorest translation, provided only it be faithful,--though it reproduce all the artistic confusion of tenses, moods, and persons, with which the original teems,--will not only suffice to display what an eloquent friend maintains to be the all-in-all of poetry--'the action of the piece'--but may help to illustrate his assurance that 'the Greeks are the highest models of expression, the unapproached masters of the grand style: their expression is so excellent because it is so admirably kept in its right degree of prominence, because it is so simple and so well subordinated, because it draws its force directly from the pregnancy of the matter which it conveys . . . not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in, stroke on stroke!' So may all happen!

The work undoubtedly proves that actions without a suitable language or inspired treatment convey very little.

DeVane remarks: 'The performance is part of a strange perversity that grew on Browning in his later years: he would argue his opinions, or demonstrate the absurdity of the beliefs of others, without a thought that he was harming his own poetic genius in the process' (Handbook, p. 419). But as Philip Drew says in the Poetry of Browning, it is 'very hard to believe that Browning indulged in such a laborious practical joke' (p. 360). The tone of the introduction suggests that Browning knew that the work was an artistic failure, though he felt that it was a genuine literal translation. Drew's point seems sensible, 'it is clear . . . that by the time he had completed it he realized that it too could be used to refute Arnold' (p. 361).

I also feel, however, that Browning undertook the translation with a serious aim in mind. I believe that the work is part of an interest in language as a medium of expression, an interest which can be seen throughout Browning's work and particularly in The Ring and the Book and in several of the poems which follow. In the introduction Browning describes the work as a 'somewhat toilsome and perhaps fruitless adventure'. This makes the work a serious undertaking: it is the introduction which Browning regards as a 'recreation'. Therefore, the joke is not the translation but the introduction. The introduction finds a public use for a work which I feel Browning regarded mainly as a private experiment.²⁸ There is also perhaps another aspect to the Agamemnon which would give much more weight to Browning's rather weak attack on Arnold.

Philip Drew adds a footnote to Browning's 'opportune use of an artistic failure . . . to score a point in debate' (Poetry of Browning, p. 361):

If Browning had read Arnold's various lectures on the translation of Homer (1861-2) he might have remembered that Arnold had already made it quite clear in his remarks on Francis Newman that he did not expect every literal translation to recapture the full quality of the original. As he says the question is not whether we get full change for our Greek, but whether we get it in gold or in copper. (p. 455, note 7)

I think it probable that Browning had read these and some of Arnold's other essays, and possibly Browning had in mind a particular passage on translation from the Preface to Merope (1858):

But a translation is a work not only inferior to the original by the whole difference of talent between the first composer and his translator: it is even inferior to the best which the translator could do under more inspiring circumstances. No man can do his best with a subject which does not penetrate him: no man can be penetrated by a subject which he does not conceive independently. (CPW I, 39)

Browning's Agamemnon exactly illustrates Arnold's views on translations, and also exactly contradicts Arnold's main argument on the all-importance of subject-matter in the Preface of 1853. 'The all-in-all of poetry' is not 'the action of the piece'.

In the Preface to Merope Arnold seems to make the greatness of a poem depend not upon the subject itself, but upon the poet's penetration and conception of the subject, and this, as I argued in Chapter Two, is central to Browning's theory of poetry. If Browning was aware of what Arnold wrote about translations then the introduction to the Agamemnon takes on a sharper meaning. What Browning says about translations could not be more provokingly unlike what his 'eloquent friend' advised. But if what Arnold does say about translations is applied here, in such close proximity to his views in the Preface on subject-matter, then it becomes clear that he contradicts himself.

By associating 'translation' so closely with Arnold's advocacy of

Greek models, Browning suggests that too faithful a following of Greek models will produce nothing but a 'translation'--something which Arnold himself regards as 'inferior to the original'. Moreover, Arnold's key point about the superiority of classical subjects is contradicted by his own view that 'no man can do his best with a subject . . . which he does not conceive independently'.

Browning's transcript is not a petty thrust at Arnold about the 1853 Preface again. The transcript was an experiment with language. The thought behind it was an attempt to identify where the essence of poetry lay--is it the words themselves which hold the poet's vision and ideas, or is it something else? With such thoughts in his mind, and the fact that he was writing on a Greek subject, it is not strange that he should think about Arnold's view that the essence of poetry stemmed from its subject-matter.

Browning's debate with Arnold is also in part a statement and defence of his own poetic views, and even where it seems to be narrowly concerned with whether the poet should choose his subjects from past or present, it clearly extends to Browning's most central beliefs about art and about life itself. Although, as I argued earlier, Browning also criticizes several other poets who chose to concentrate on subjects taken from myth or the distant past, only Arnold attracted an interest which lasted over many years and which stimulated Browning to make replies in several poems.

The reasons for Browning's special interest in Arnold were already suggested at the start of this chapter, but in particular I would emphasize Browning's recognition that Arnold's classicism was not only a theory about poetry, but also a theory about life. This aspect of the Browning-Arnold debate was observed by Leonard Burrows (see p. 242) who argued that, to some extent, the debate was a basic opposition of Hellenism and Hebraism.

II

In this section of the chapter I shall examine this broader area of the debate between Browning and Arnold. Naturally, the scope of this examination must be severely limited. The topic is vast and would merit an independent study. My concern will be to argue that the debate, generally recognized in poems such as 'Cleon' and 'De Lairesse', extends to some of Browning's other poems, particularly Aristophanes' Apology and Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau; that Browning regarded poetry as being capable of embracing every subject and hence of being capable of criticizing every area of life; and finally, that any poetry which limited itself to past standards and traditions, and which cut itself off from reality, curbed the development of both poetry and of mankind. These arguments are most fully presented in Aristophanes' Apology, which also examines almost every aspect of poetics of interest to the age.

The interpretation of Aristophanes' Apology which I offer here, and which I have already presented in part in Chapter Two, is only one interpretation of the poem which has several themes and layers of meaning.²⁹ However, in my view, Aristophanes' Apology, like the 'Essay on Shelley' and the Parleyings, is deeply concerned with the contemporary world of Victorian Britain, and particularly with the contemporary poetic situation. Donald Smalley in 'A Parleying with Aristophanes' (1940) has already demonstrated that the poem can be read as a kind of Browning 'poetics', and Clyde deL. Ryals, in his 'Balaustion's Adventure: Browning's Greek Parable' (1973), has shown how the first of the Balaustion poems is also an expression of Browning's ideas about the poetry of his own times. Ryals says: 'Balaustion's Adventure is the poet's message

to his age that, at a time when civilisation seems on the verge of complete disruption, the spirit if not the forms of the past can enliven the present and redeem the individual from despair' (p. 1040).

Ryals traces the relation of this poem to several other Browning poems which discuss art. In particular he relates the poem to The Ring and the Book, and to Browning's ideas on the proper use of myth. In his 'Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville' Browning writes:

A myth may teach:
Only, who better would expound it thus
Must be Euripides not Aeschylus
(VIII)

In effect, Browning advocates the reinterpretation of myth so that it will have a direct relevance to modern reality. In Aristophanes' Apology Browning clarifies his opposition to those poets who seek to isolate poetry from reality, so that the poet is 'encircled with poetic atmosphere, / As lark emballed by its own crystal song' (2163-64).

As I have already suggested above (and in Chapter Two), the poem concerns itself primarily with the question of how poetry best serves mankind. Browning recognizes the strong desire in his age to use poetry to maintain and express the qualities and virtues of man which seem threatened by, or absent in, contemporary life. Browning frequently identified himself with Euripides, and it is clear that he does so in this poem. If it is accepted that the poem is in large measure a Browning 'poetics', with Euripides representing much of what Browning stands for, it is hard to imagine that Browning had no particular contemporary figure in mind for his conception of Aristophanes. The fact that he identified such a minor character as 'dogface Eruxis' (1674) with the critic Alfred Austin, (see DeVane, Handbook, p. 382), also suggests that Browning had a contemporary in mind for Aristophanes.

The method of associating contemporaries with characters from the past is fully developed in the Parleyings (1887), and it is tempting to see Aristophanes' Apology as a kind of prototype parleying, as Donald Smalley does. If Browning identifies Aristophanes with some contemporary, then Arnold becomes the obvious candidate for this identification. Arnold, like Aristophanes, attempts to use poetry to maintain stability in an age of turbulent and disturbing change. Aristophanes' teaching is 'accept the old, / Contest the strange!' (2649-50). Browning's presentation of Aristophanes' comic poetry resembles both Arnold's advocacy of classical poetry and his prose criticism. Aristophanes bases his defence of his art on 'prescriptive use, / Authorization by antiquity' (2979-80), just as Arnold bases his defence on tradition.

The aims of Aristophanes' criticism closely resemble Arnold's:

Support religion, lash irreverence,
 Yet laughingly administer rebuke
 To superstitious folly,--equal fault!
 While innovating rashness, lust of change,
 New laws, new habits, manners, men and things,
 Make your main quarry,--'oldest' meaning 'best'.
 You check the fretful litigation-itch,
 Withstand mob-rule, expose mob-flattery,
 Punish mob-favourites; most of all press hard
 On sophists who assist the demagogue,
 And poets their accomplices in crime.
 Such your main quarry: by the way, you strike
 Ignobler game, mere miscreants, snob or scamp,
 Cowardly, gluttonous, effeminate:
 Still with a bolt to spare when dramatist
 Proves haply unproficient in his art.
 Such aims--alone, no matter for the means--
 Declare the unexampled excellence
 Of their first author--Aristophanes!
 (2989-3007)

This well describes the range of Arnold's criticism. For example, in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864), he writes:
 'Ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too

much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionise this world to their bidding,--that is quite another thing' (CPW III, 265). Compare this to lines 2992-94. Arnold's whole essay is in a sense an exposure of 'mob-flattery'--demonstrated by attacking, as a practical specific example, Sir Charles Adderley's 'The old Anglo-Saxon race, the best breed in the whole world!'

Aristophanes resembles even more closely the later Arnold of Friendship's Garland (1871) and Culture and Anarchy (1869).³⁰ Arnold's constant, but decreasing, interest in poetry seems to be observed in the lines 'Still with a bolt to spare when dramatist / Proves haply unproficient in his art'. The phrase "'oldest" meaning "best"', which Balaustion goes on to criticize thoroughly, surely applies to Arnold's notorious use of 'indefinite terms'.³¹ The logic of 'oldest' meaning 'best' is highly questionable and completely opposes Browning's views on development and growth.

Balaustion rejects Aristophanes' 'authorization by antiquity', and the reasons for her rejection again resemble contemporary criticisms of Arnold's views on classical poetry.

For what offends our judgement! 'Tis your work,
 Performed your way: not work delivered you
 Intact, intact producible in turn.
 Everywhere have you altered old to new--
 Your will, your warrant: therefore, work must stand
 Or stumble by intrinsic worth.

(2981-86)

Fitzjames Stephen in the Saturday Review (1861) noted the dominance of Arnold's own 'will' and 'warrant'. 'The whole of the lectures are one constant I--I--I. . . . "I say" this, "I say" that, to the end of the lectures'.³² Arnold's classicism in his poetry and in his theory is

based on a personal interpretation of the classical culture, and, as I argued earlier, Arnold selects and emphasizes those qualities in Greek poetry which alleviate the difficulties he himself experiences in writing poetry. I have also pointed out several other parallels between Browning's view of Aristophanes and Arnold in the previous chapter, however, there is, I believe, a more particular bond between Aristophanes and Arnold--Arnold's 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1869).

The title of the essay is exactly the main theme of Browning's poem--what is, or should be, the modern element in literature? Philip Drew, commenting on Arnold's essay, says: 'Naturally one hopes to find here Arnold's opinions of the literature of his own age, but he disappoints expectation. Early in the lecture he makes it plain that his main concern is to justify the literature of ancient Greece' (Poetry of Browning, p. 371). For Browning the discrepancy between the title and the content must have been not only disappointing but also provocative. Arnold uses the fifth century in Greece as a 'modern epoch', an epoch comparable to the nineteenth century. He uses its literature as a model of a literature which is 'adequate', which offers 'an intellectual deliverance' and interprets its age. Browning, therefore, has a ready made precedent for setting the debate between Arnold and himself on modern poetry in fifth century Greece, and also, by using this setting, he implicitly connects the Aristophanes-Euripides debate with his own debate with Arnold.

In 'On the Modern Element' Arnold specifically defends Aristophanes (and barely mentions Euripides). He writes:

The poetry of Aristophanes is an adequate representation of [the age] also. True, this poetry regards humanity from the comic side; but there is a comic side from which to regard humanity as well as a tragic one; and the distinction of Aristophanes is to have regarded it from the true point of view on the comic side. He too, like Sophocles, regards the human nature of his time in its fullest development; the boldest creations of a riotous imagination are in Aristophanes . . . based always upon the foundation of a serious thought: politics, education, social life, literature--all the great modes in which the human life of his day manifested itself--are the subjects of his thoughts, and of his penetrating comment. There is shed, therefore, over his poetry the charm, the vital freshness, which is felt when man and his relations are from any side adequately, and therefore genially, regarded. (CPW I, 29)³³

Arnold's remarks on Aristophanes could be applied to himself, if one substitutes criticism for comic poetry (and in Aristophanes' Apology Browning does, to some extent, make just this substitution). 'Serious thought' and 'penetrating comment' on the human nature of his time in all its manifestations--politics, education, social life, literature--are precisely what Arnold offers in his poetry and prose. The additional remark that Aristophanes adds to this thought and comment 'charm', 'vital freshness', and geniality, heightens the similarity between Aristophanes and Arnold. Indeed these remarks can more truly be applied to Arnold than to Aristophanes, and if one looks at Arnold's comment as a whole, it is noticeable that the 'riotous imagination' of Aristophanes, his most salient characteristic, is considerably played down to emphasize his serious criticism of his age. Just as Browning identified with Euripides, Arnold identified with Aristophanes (though not, I think, on a conscious level).

Arnold's conclusion to the essay is Browning's starting-point:

The intellectual history of our race cannot be clearly understood without applying to other ages, nations, and literatures the same method of inquiry which we have been here imperfectly applying to what is called classical antiquity. But enough has at least been said, perhaps, to establish the absolute, the enduring interest of Greek literature, and, above all, of Greek poetry. (CPW I, 37)

Browning carries out his inquiry into classical and modern intellectual history concurrently, and tries to show that there can be no absolute and permanent interest in a literature of a single era, that poetry must continually develop. The passage quoted earlier on Aristophanes is followed almost immediately by a statement that:

The human race has the strongest, the most invincible tendency to live, to develop itself. It retains, it clings to what fosters its life, what favours its development, to the literature which exhibits it in its vigour; it rejects, it abandons what does not foster its development, the literature which exhibits it arrested and decayed. (CPW I, 29-30)

The last point is the main criticism which Browning brought against Greek art.

In 'Old Pictures in Florence' Greek art is rejected because it presents 'an eternal petrification' (XVIII). In 'Cleon' Browning's point is that Greek art not only arrests development, but also exhibits it 'decayed'. Cleon advises "'Let progress end at once"' (222) since with Greek culture, 'Most progress is most failure' (272) because everything must end with death. Life is depressed by a continual awareness of the futility of developing the inner spirit of man if it is to be increasingly frustrated by the physical decline of the body:

my fate is deadlier still,
 In this, that every day my sense of joy
 Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
 In power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;
 While every day my hairs fall more and more,
 My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase.
 (309-14)

Arnold's passage on development, coinciding as it does with one of Browning's central beliefs, must have struck Browning as ironic in a work which concludes by advocating 'the absolute, the enduring interest of Greek literature, and, above all, of Greek poetry'.

It is important to see that Browning recognizes common ground between Aristophanes and Euripides, just as he recognizes common ground between himself and Arnold. Browning considers ideal poetry to be a blend of the poetic powers of Aristophanes and Euripides:

Comedy and Tragedy combine,
Prove some new Both-yet-neither, all one bard,
Euripides with Aristophanes
Coöperant!

(3440-43)

Both poets are aware of the conditions of their times and of the importance of poetry to the future of mankind. Aristophanes says to Balaustion, 'Does my opinion so diverge from yours? / Probably less than little--not at all!' (2560-61). Their opinions do differ, but it is on their differing understanding of the nature of poetry and its part in the development of man, and a differing understanding of the method poetry must adopt to effect its aims, rather than on the aims themselves.

Aristophanes continues by saying:

To know a matter, for my very self
And intimates--that's one thing; to imply
By 'knowledge'--loosing whatso'er I know
Among the vulgar who, by mere mistake,
May brain themselves and me in consequence,--
That's quite another.

(2562-67)

This is the opposite of Browning's 'Maker-see' ideas which are exactly concerned with 'loosing' the poet's knowledge and vision 'among the

vulgar'. As I argued in Chapter Two, Browning's theory of poetry leaves a great deal to the reader, and particularly leaves the 'consequence' of the poetry entirely in the reader's hands. In the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning says that having received the 'creation', revealing 'the fact itself . . . with its infinite significances', the reader 'is hereafter left to deal with [it], as in proportion to his own intelligence, he best may' (p. 64).

The common ground and the crucial differences between the two poets is revealed in two very similar pairs of lines. Euripides brings poetry 'Down to the level of our common life, / Close to the beating of our common heart' (5567-68). Aristophanes is a 'strong understander of our common life, / . . . urged sustainment of humanity' (1886-87). Both are concerned with the essential nature of man, and with maintaining the common bonds of sympathy between man and man. But Euripides brings poetry down to the level of actual life, while Aristophanes remains the poet-interpreter of life, who 'urges' the 'sustainment' of the qualities which bond together mankind. The distinction here involves what I called in Chapter Two, Browning's effacement of the poet.

Aristophanes and Arnold remain, as poet and critic, very much in the fore of their writings. They stand, as Browning put it in Sordello, with 'pointing-pole in hand' (I, 30) beside the reader, telling him what to think. The word 'urged' suggests a direct didacticism which Browning felt art should avoid: 'the glory and good of Art' is that it 'may tell a truth / Obliquely' (The Ring and the Book XII, 838, 855-56). Also, 'sustainment of humanity' suggests a conservative rather than a progressive attitude to man's development. The phrase reminds one of Arnold's Preface with its stress on 'the great primary human affections' and 'the elementary part of our nature'.

Thus, while Browning recognizes common aims between Arnold and himself, he stands opposed to Arnold on several important issues--on ideas about poetic subject-matter, on the treatment of that subject-matter, on the relationship between the development of man and of poetry, and on the point which I have been considering here, the method poetry should adopt to effect its aims. In Aristophanes' Apology Browning particularly considers the question of what is the best way to present a 'criticism of life'.

The 'criticism of life' offered by Aristophanes opposes Browning's poetic ideas on three major points. First, it is a direct criticism and not an 'oblique' criticism. Balaustion asks Aristophanes:

In plain words,
Have you exchanged brute-blows,--which teach the brute
Man may surpass him in brutality,--
For human fighting, or true god-like force
Which breathes persuasion nor needs fight at all?
(857-61)

Secondly, to make his case more effective, Aristophanes, like Arnold, is willing to exaggerate:

you press
Such argument as people understand:
If with exaggeration--what care you?
(3118-20)

Thirdly, as both of the other points suggest, such criticism implies a condescending attitude to the audience, and a low opinion of the nature of man.

Men are, were, ever will be fools.
(1649)

Again, Browning's opposition comes to centre on the question of development.

Euripides is associated with the saying, 'Trust on, trust ever, trust to end--in truth!' (1405), and with the boast, 'I paint men as they are' (2129). This corresponds to Browning's ideas on the progress of man and art in 'Old Pictures in Florence':

To cries of 'Greek Art and what more wish you?'--
 Replied, 'To become now self-acquainters,
 And paint man man, whatever the issue!'
 (XIX)

and in Sordello:

'Cannot men bear, now, something better?--fly
 A pitch beyond this unreal pageantry
 Of essences? the period sure has ceased
 For such: present us with ourselves, at least.'
 (II, 563-66)

The assumption is that man has developed and can now bear the truth about himself. Although it seems that the issue about truth in Aristophanes' Apology is a different one from that in 'Old Pictures in Florence' and Sordello, a matter of exaggerating the faults and weaknesses of man rather than of presenting a false perfection of man or of presenting abstract personifications of his various qualities, Browning is still making the basic point that Aristophanes, unlike Euripides, does not present 'men as they are', and hence does not present the truth.

Arnold in 'The Function of Criticism' (1864) made the all-important rule of criticism 'disinterestedness'. 'By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things;" by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches' (CPW III, 270). But in fact, as was said of Aristophanes, Arnold frequently indulged in 'brute-blows'. The hostility which Arnold's criticism evoked was exactly what Browning

felt art avoided by its oblique method. Moreover art can present the truth (without exaggeration) since it escapes the limitations of 'human speech', 'human testimony', and 'human estimation'. I shall examine more closely what Browning means in this passage from The Ring and the Book (XII, 835-67) in the next chapter. The main point against Aristophanes' criticism is that by concentrating so completely on criticism he fails to achieve his aims, and in this I feel there is a personal criticism by Browning of Arnold's abandonment of poetry for prose criticism.

I have said that Aristophanes' Apology has several themes but it is important to remember that the subject of the poem is the 'apology' by Aristophanes. Clyde deL. Ryals writes, 'In the figure of Aristophanes, Browning again turns to one of his favourite speculations, a question he had pondered in considering Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Don Juan, and Miranda--namely, why men fail to live up to their best capacities and potentialities. . . . They fail when they do not admit the dual thrusts of their natures and recognize only one pole of the dialectic tension' (Browning's Later Poetry, p. 115). These remarks obviously apply to the Aristophanes of the poem, but they do not apply to the historical Aristophanes. Browning's view of Aristophanes only begins to make sense when one realises that he has produced a conflation of Aristophanes and Arnold.

Balaustion's criticism of Aristophanes again does not make much sense if it is applied purely to the historical Aristophanes, but it is a most pertinent comment on Arnold's career:

Did your particular self advance in aught.

No, there's deterioration manifest
 Year by year, play by play! survey them all,
 From the boy's-triumph when 'Acharnes' dawned,
 To 'Thesmophoriazousai',--this man's shame!
 There, truly, patriot zeal so prominent
 Allowed friends' plea perhaps: the baser stuff
 Was but the nobler spirit's vehicle.

(3404, 3407-13)

This suggests a turning from the promising art of youth to a more immediately social, but much less artistic, work in later life.

Frederic Harrison's Arminius made a similar comment on Arnold: 'Tell him to do more in literature--he has the talent for it; and to avoid Carlylese as he would the devil.'³⁴

Balaustion refuses to accept any excuse for this turning to 'the baser stuff'. 'Worst sophistry / Is when man's own soul plays its own self false' (3423-24), and she goes on to say:

Yet all the same--O genius and O gold--
Had genius ne'er diverted gold from use
Worthy the temple, to do copper's work
And coat a swine's trough--which abundantly
Might furnish Phoibos' tripod, Pallas' throne!
(3430-34)

The entire passage, lines 3430-45, could be seen as a criticism of, and tribute to, Arnold's poetic powers. Browning seems to be saying that if Arnold had discarded his role as 'convention's watch / And ward', and had by 're-ordinating outworn rule, / Made Comedy and Tragedy combine' he might have truly achieved in his own time the same powerful effects of the great classical poets by making the past live again.

reproducing Now
As that gave Then existence: Life today,
This, as that other--Life dead long ago!
(3443-45)

The reference to Phoibos and Pallas seems particularly appropriate to Arnold's blend of lyricism and thought or criticism in his poetry (cf. the remark by Rowland Prothero, that a 'large section of his poetry consists almost entirely of criticism').

The passage also relates directly to Arnold in that lines 3430-32 seem to be an echo of Arnold's 'On Translating Homer: Last Words' (1862):

Here Mr Newman's erudition misleads him: he knows the literal value of the Greek so well, that he thinks his literal rendering identical with the Greek, and that the Greek must stand or fall along with his rendering. But the real question is, not whether he has given us, so to speak, full change for the Greek, but how he gives us our change: we want it in gold, and he gives it us in copper. (CPW I, 176, my emphasis)

Browning has turned this back on Arnold himself. The remarks on translation immediately before the gold-copper metaphor could be applied most pertinently to Browning's Agamemnon (1877). As I argued earlier when discussing the Agamemnon, I believe that Browning did know Arnold's views on translation and that he used this knowledge with effective irony in his introduction to contradict Arnold's advocacy of classical subjects. In Aristophanes' Apology Browning has the same passage in mind but concentrates on the striking gold-copper metaphor to criticize Arnold's debasement of his own talent.

III

I shall now draw together and conclude the main arguments of this chapter. The debate with Arnold in Aristophanes' Apology obviously extends far beyond poetic subject-matter. The debate emerges as being about the proper understanding of what poetry is and what its function is. The poet's choice of subject suggests a whole theory of poetry and, indeed, an attitude to life. Arnold is characterized as wanting to use poetry to serve the needs of the age--'Save Sense, poet!' (2103). The poet's subject-matter is chosen to conserve and maintain the values and standards under attack in the age. Poetry remains in a 'roseate world' (2158), unconnected to reality. In this way it fails to accept or to encourage development. Browning recognizes this as the essential

contrast between Arnold and himself. Aristophanes says:

Their instinct grasps the new?
 Mine bids retain the old: a fight must be,
 And which is stronger the event will show.
 (2671-73)

From 'Old Pictures in Florence' it is very clear that in Browning's opinion the new will prove stronger.

It is, however, important to see that Browning, like Arnold, accepts that poetry has a pragmatic function: that it has a relevance and effect upon life. The debate with Arnold (and with those poets who strive to 'retain the old') concerns the nature of this relevance and effect. Does poetry belong to a 'phantasmal sphere' (2218), and present ideals (Aristophanes), or does it belong 'on vulgar earth' (2219) and present reality (Euripides)? The main divisions are clear between a traditional poetry which presents man with beautiful ideals, and a poetry which analyses reality.

This contrast in subject-matter is matched by a contrast in poetic form. Poetry, compared to a 'lark emballed by its own crystal song' (2164), cannot maintain this 'poetic atmosphere' (2163) if it is not intending to be 'lark-like':

Beauty, in all truth--
 That's certain somehow! Must the eagle lilt
 Lark-like, needs fir-tree blossom rose-like? No!
 Strength and utility charm more than grace
 And what's most ugly proves most beautiful.
 (2168-72)

As in 'De Lairesse' and 'Old Pictures in Florence', Browning recognizes a division between an unreal conventional aesthetic beauty, and a beauty which is found in the truth about reality. The ultimate aim for Browning is always truth.

The debate in Aristophanes' Apology covers not only Arnold's classical poetic theory but also his prose criticism. Again there is no reason for the historical Aristophanes to argue that the poet should maintain ideals and dwell in a 'roseate world'; his own comedies have no resemblance to such a poetry. But the argument is important if Aristophanes is to be representative of Arnold since Arnold did attempt to avoid contact with the 'vulgar earth'. Aristophanes' comic poetry is used to present Browning's views on Arnold's criticism, and to show why Browning feels that this form of criticism is inferior to poetry and a debasement of the artist's talent.

The main argument against direct criticism is that the artist cannot be disinterested: he is, as Arnold himself said he should not be, a sharer in the strife and not a neutral observer. Browning's Euripides is accused of being a 'cold hater of his kind' (283) because of his detachment, and yet it is his poetry which criticizes and examines the actual life around him. In Aristophanes' Apology the considerable space which is devoted to a discussion of the criticism of life is not meant to apply solely to Arnold's career; Browning is in fact, making an important statement about poetry, and particularly about poetry which is deliberately remote from reality.

In the poem the criticism of Aristophanes eventually becomes a personal criticism: his failure is presented as a personal failure. Browning does not drift into this: the theme of the public poet and the private man runs throughout the poem (and was the subject of the poems 'Shop' and 'House' in the Pacchiarotto volume). In the section about Sophocles and the ridiculous result of his experimental command of a squadron (271-81), Browning makes it clear that the poet and the man must be regarded as two separate beings. Sophocles cannot be

expected to excel at commanding an army because he penned the Antigone. When the poet and the private man are confused and compounded his activity in either or both life and poetry suffer.

The discussion which opened this chapter on the Victorian poet's dilemma of whether to serve his art or his age is exactly the problem which Browning examines in his poem. The crucial new dimension which he brings to the discussion is his distinction between the poet, his poetry, and the private individual. The situation in 'The Palace of Art', or Aristophanes' vision of the poet as a 'rose enmisted by that scent it makes!', makes no distinction between poet, poetry, and man. Without this distinction the private individual's uneasiness with the life of his times inevitably results in the poet's uneasiness with reality, and consequently in a poetry which reflects this either by being a 'dialogue of the mind with itself . . . [on] modern problems', or by being completely detached from the real world. In trying to eliminate or control the contemporary, and his own personal, tendency towards excessive subjectivity, Arnold restricts the poet and his poetry to a realm detached from any immediate contact with reality. Browning's 'lark emballed by its own crystal song' very neatly captures Arnold's idea of the poet and his poetry being entirely enclosed in 'the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws'.

In the most scathing section of Balaustion's criticism of Aristophanes, she attacks the progressive debasement of his talents and says:

patriot zeal so prominent
Allowed friend's plea perhaps: the baser stuff
Was but the nobler spirit's vehicle.

(3411-13)

The urgency of the social conditions demands that he sacrifice his art in order to achieve immediate and practical results through a baser, but more direct, form of communication. Again Browning sees this as a failure to distinguish between poetry and the poet. In Aristophanes' Apology, immediately after the passage on the experiment with Sophocles about the poet's 'fit use of faculty' (281), Euripides is jeered at for maintaining his isolation. Yet he also advised and aided the Macedonian king, Archelaos. Browning is contrasting Euripides with Sophocles. The poet's poetic talent cannot be used to render any practical service to society, but the man himself may be as much involved in life as any other individual. As man and poet Euripides belongs to both 'the vulgar hearth' and 'a sea-cave', just as in Pacchiarotto Browning dwells in both 'House' and 'Shop'. Browning's point is clear: the poet must be detached from life, an observer rather than a participant (like the poet in 'How It Strikes a Contemporary'), but this isolation is maintained not to 'emball' the poet in 'poetic atmosphere', but to allow him to see reality more clearly. Of Euripides it is said: 'the real / He wants, not falsehood,--truth alone he seeks' (2166-67).

In his presentation of the art of Euripides, Browning makes one of his strongest defences of his own art, and one of his strongest attacks on Arnold's poetic theory and prose criticism. Euripides' art, sounding very like Browning's, is said to 'Boast innovations, cramp phrase, uncouth song, / Hard matter and harsh manner' (2185-86). What is indicated here are changes both in the subject-matter and form of poetry. Aristophanes regards this as a spoiling of art (2176). In the passage which follows, these innovations are justified in a way which seems to criticize Arnold's Preface:

the shag-rag hero-race,
The noble slaves, wise women, move as much
Pity and terror as true tragic types.
(2191-93)

Arnold asked: 'Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido,--what modern poem presents personages as interesting?' In several of his essays Arnold emphasizes the need for tradition. Browning goes on to argue that the public:

Applauds inventiveness--the plot so new,
The turn and trick subsidiary so strange!
She relishes that homely phrase of life,
That common town-talk, more than trumpet-blasts:
Accords him right to chop and change a myth:
What better right had he, who told the tale
In the first instance, to embellish fact?
This last may disembellish yet improve!
(2194-201)

Browning suggests that the effects of poetry cannot be achieved by the same things or the same means in every age. Ordinary men and women now 'move [the reader] as much' as Achilles or Prometheus. 'Inventiveness' rather than tradition gives pleasure. Plain language is now more welcome than rhetorical or poetic eloquence. Subject, form, and language must all change to suit the 'fashion' of the time, to suit man's new ways of apprehending truth.

Of particular importance is Browning's view that the modern poet should change myth to reveal the fact from which it was originally created. This point is reinforced by an analogy:

Both find a block: this man carves back to bull
What first his predecessor cut to sphinx:
Such genuine actual roarer, nature's brute,
Intelligible to our time, was sure
The old-world artist's purpose, had he worked
To mind; this both means and makes the thing!
(2202-07)

This has a strong resemblance to 'Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville'. 'Look through the sign to the thing signified' (VII,192), and it is in this poem that Browning says, 'A myth may teach: / Only, who better would expound it thus / Must be Euripides not Aeschylus' (VIII,204-06). In the lines from Aristophanes' Apology, the earlier artist makes a 'sphinx', while the modern artist carves a 'bull'. The sphinx is an imaginary creation, associated with riddles. The bull is the 'genuine actual roarer, nature's brute, / Intelligible to our time'. The modern artist 'disembellishes' to reveal the clarity of the actual, the real. He 'both means and makes the thing'. The important phrase, 'intelligible to our time', drives home the point that the subject-matter and the treatment of subject-matter must keep pace with man's progress towards a complete understanding of truth.

By establishing this relationship between poetry and reality, Browning does two very important things. First, he rejects any notion of rules or traditions having a permanent value. Poetry is not static but directly related to man's development. Secondly, he rejects the idea that poetry belongs to some small portion of life, something to be enjoyed for the moment with no influence or consequence beyond that moment. Both of these ideas which Browning rejects are contained in the similes of the lark and the rose. The lark's song, like the rose's scent, encloses it in 'poetic atmosphere'. It is shut off from the world, and the aesthetic pleasure which it offers is limited to a very small area.

In Aristophanes' attack on Euripides' poetry there is a clear break in his argument. Euripides' innovations in poetry are reluctantly accepted, but his extension of poetry into a 'criticism of life', is not.

Does Euripides

Even so far absolved, remain content?
 Nowise! His task is to refine, refine,
 Divide, distinguish, subtilize away
 Whatever seemed a solid planting-place
 For foot-fall,--not in that phantasmal sphere
 Proper to poet, but on vulgar earth
 Where people used to tread with confidence.
 (2213-20)

When Arnold speaks of a 'criticism of life' in poetry he does not use 'criticism' in the same way as he does in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864). His essay 'Wordsworth' (1879), suggests that Arnold believes that the poet works with ideas which have already been ordered. Poetry presents a 'criticism of life', but the work of poetry is in the presentation of such criticism, and not in the actual work of criticism itself. In 'The Function of Criticism', 'the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition [i.e. presentation], not of analysis and discovery [i.e. criticism]; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired . . . by a certain order of ideas' (my emphasis, CPW III, 261). 'The creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it' (p. 261).

In the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning made it clear that the poet must always work directly from reality and not from second-hand interpretations. In Aristophanes' Apology he specifically argues that poetry has a critical function of analysis and discovery and belongs to 'vulgar earth' and not to 'that phantasmal sphere'. This argument reinforces his previous arguments about the nature of poetry--if poetry is in itself a criticism of life, then it must deal with real life and cannot work purely with traditional subjects and traditional interpretations of subjects.

Aristophanes' Apology has many connections with Browning's later

Parleyings, and these links strengthen the idea that the poem is a kind of prototype 'parleying', another oblique statement of Browning's thoughts on poetry and life. The passage quoted above is similar to the 'Parleying with Francis Furini', particularly lines 401-23.

firm and fast
 There did I plant my first foot. And the next?
 Nowhere! 'Twas put forth and withdrawn, perplexed
 At touch of what seemed stable and proved stuff
 Such as the coloured clouds are.
 (401-05)

But,

what means knowledge--to aspire or bide
 Content with half-attaining? Hardly so!
 [Man is] made to know on, know ever, I must know
 All to be known at any halting-stage
 Of my soul's progress.
 (459-63)

Line 461 is very similar to Euripides' 'Trust on, trust ever, trust to end--in truth!' Again Browning's thought returns to his theory of man's progress, which, as I have argued, is at the root of his disagreement with Arnold.

In Aristophanes' Apology Browning condemns Arnold's method of direct criticism. In 'The Function of Criticism' Arnold himself writes:

A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to
 the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them
 willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the
 better to secure it against attack; and clearly this
 is narrowing and baneful to them. (CPW III, 271)³⁵

The argument here is very like Browning's conclusion to The Ring and the Book (XII, 837-63), and especially the lines,

but here's the plague
 That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
 Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false.
 (848-50)

It is of great importance that Browning should choose to conclude his greatest work with this statement that 'the glory and good of Art' is exactly its power of the indirect communication of truth. The attack on Aristophanes (and Arnold) is not then divided: an assault on his views of poetry, followed by an assault on his criticism. The whole debate concerns poetry, and the crucial attack on Aristophanes is that he curbs the progress of poetry and of man.

Aristophanes implicitly denies that poetry must change, and that it is essentially connected to reality. More than this, his preference for direct criticism rather than an indirect criticism through poetry is regarded as 'deterioration' (3407). He has no real faith in man or in poetry. He will not risk misinterpretation (see 2562-67) and so uses 'brute-blows' rather than the 'true god-like force' (860), which persuades and does not need to 'fight at all' (861). To make his blows more effective he indulges in exaggeration, and so moves away from truth. It is significant that Euripides' exclamation should be, 'Trust on, trust ever, trust to end--in truth!' The dominant word is 'trust' as much as 'truth', and the sentence itself mirrors the process of progression through faith to the final and ultimate truth.

Aristophanes' Apology is one of Browning's fullest examinations of poetic theory. The length of the examination gives some indication of the importance which Browning attached to Arnold's views on poetry, and more generally, to every view which regarded poetry as something distanced from real life. Euripides' trust in truth should not be seen as an example of Browning's supposed hearty optimism. It is precisely because Euripides' truth is unpleasant and not indicative of a hopeful future that Aristophanes is concerned to 'contest the strange' and 'retain the old'. But the point is that without this trust, there is

a reluctance to accept reality as it is, and hence a reluctance to progress towards truth. In the quotation from 'Francis Furini' given earlier, even though the next step seems to take man from the 'firm and fast' to 'stuff / Such as the coloured clouds are', man cannot be 'content with half-attaining'.

Throughout the debate with Arnold, and with the poets who choose a subject-matter of escape in general, the emphasis falls not on subject-matter, but on man's changing perception of truth and on the need for poetry to keep pace with these changes. Browning's works include several poems set in ancient Greece or in the Medieval period, but Browning invariably intends that such subjects chosen from the distant past or from myth be interpreted to reveal a truth relevant to the world as man now perceives it. The modern poet has the same right to 'disembellish yet improve' myth as the old-world artist had to 'embellish fact'.

In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold writes:

Look at the life imaged in such a newspaper as the Nonconformist,--a life of jealousy of the Establishment, disputes, tea-meetings, openings of chapels, sermons; and then think of it as an ideal of a human life completing itself on all sides, and aspiring with all its organs after sweetness, light, and perfection!
(CPW V, 103)

In the 'Epilogue' to Pacchiarotto, Browning declares that his poetry is like 'stiff drink', 'strong' rather than 'sweet'. In 1868 Julia Wedgwood wrote that Browning lost 'the sense of proportion whenever [he began] to lay on dark shades' (Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood, p. 153). In his reply Browning admitted his fondness for the darker areas of life, 'morbid cases of the soul'. In 'Old Pictures in Florence' there is the well-known line, 'what's come to perfection perishes'. On

'sweetness, light, and perfection' Browning takes a very different view from Arnold. Browning's interest is in the world as it is.

In his letters to Julia Wedgwood his defence returns again and again to the statement that 'I think this is the world as it is and will be here at least' (p. 166). Browning's approach to Arnold's presentation of life in the quotation from Culture and Anarchy would be to seek to reveal 'sweetness, light, and perfection' beneath or within the 'life of jealousy . . . disputes, tea-meetings, openings of chapels, sermons'. Arnold is revolted by this image of life because it is not 'an ideal of a human life completing itself on all sides' (my emphasis). In 1869 H.B. Forman recognized Browning as the leader of 'the Psychological School' of poetry, and he describes Browning's method in The Ring and the Book:

he dives through what would be mud to many a muddy mind, and brings up, by help of his clear vision, all the hidden beauties to be found in any complex human subject. (my emphasis, p. 342)

Forman's article, which concludes by attacking Arnold's Preface, connects Browning's poetry to 'modern city life' and 'modern ideas' (p. 330), and to the growing influence of the modern novel. In other words, he connects Browning's poetry, as Browning himself did, to the progress of man and to the progress of art.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹ The particular needs and demands of the age as seen by Arnold may not seem typical of the mass of Victorians. The more general demand, as far as poetry was concerned, was less for an intellectual deliverance than for a poetry which would sing the age and present it in a glorious and heroic light. Great emphasis was put upon the importance of the family, the nation, the Empire, and this reveals itself in the popularity of poetry which celebrated the family and the home, or which was patriotic and nationalistic. This is, however, in some ways, a less intellectual version of the thinker's cry for an interpretive poetry. The desire is still for something to provide assurance, emotional order, and an idea of unity and stability--for something to interpret the age in a way which will give it a sense of rightness. The difference between the quality of the interpretations required could be regarded as the difference between Pippa's song in the context of Pippa Passes, and Pippa's song out of context.

² Abrams, Mirror and the Lamp, p. 16. Abrams is discussing mainly sixteenth and seventeenth century critics, but the justice of applying his general summary of the pragmatic critic's interests to Arnold can be demonstrated by comparing a few quotations from Arnold's writings with the passage from Abrams. He argues against the habit 'of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything' (my emphasis, Unpublished Letters, p. 17). To Clough he writes: 'I am glad you like the "Gipsy Scholar"--but what does it do for you?' (Letters to Clough, p. 146). The whole of the Preface of 1853 illustrates his concern with 'the practice of poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws'. These rules are accepted and advocated for the same reasons as those given by Abrams' typical pragmatic critic.

³ This is the idea behind 'The Study of Poetry'. What he seeks is 'an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality' (CPW IX, 168). It is in this essay that he speaks of poetry as 'a criticism of life' (p. 163), and says that 'we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us' (p. 161).

⁴ In 'The Study of Poetry' Arnold agrees with Wordsworth that poetry is '"the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge"' (CPW IX, 162).

⁵ Mr Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock', p. 7. Again it is important not to overemphasize isolated statements. Whistler is deliberately challenging the same Philistine attitude to art which Arnold himself attacked. Swinburne's comments on Whistler's lecture show that Whistler's portraits of Carlyle and of his own mother reveal character and are not mere arrangements or harmonies of shapes and colours (see Mr Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock' together with Mr Swinburne's Comment and Mr Whistler's Reply). Swinburne's remarks first appeared in the Fortnightly Review in June 1888.

6 This is the view of R.G. Cox in 'The Victorian Criticism of Poetry: the Minority Tradition', p. 15. Cox's view is supported by Isobel Armstrong in her introduction to Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870. She notes that the Preface of 1853 has several parallels to the earlier debates raised by Tennyson's poems in the 1830s and 1840s.

7 Coulling gives various examples of such attacks in both of the works listed in the Bibliography.

8 See 'Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface', pp. 260-61, and Matthew Arnold and His Critics, pp. 60-61.

9 'L'Année Terrible', A Study of Victor Hugo. Works XIII, 243.

10 This is the core of the argument in 'On the Modern Element in Literature'. See the quotation on p. 221.

11 Letters to Clough, p. 146 (30 November 1853). Philip Drew uses this letter as evidence that later 'Arnold abandoned the beliefs he stated in the Preface'. The letter was also written in 1853 and Drew comments: 'While this letter does not actually contradict the Preface, it is perceptibly removed from it in spirit' (Poetry of Browning, p. 370). I cannot see how this letter differs in any marked respect from the spirit of the Preface. There is exactly the same stress on the effect of a poem, and the phrase 'what they want is something to animate and ennoble them' is very similar to the phrase in the Preface, 'it is demanded . . . that it shall inspire and rejoice the reader'.

12 Cf. Prothero's comments on Arnold to Arthur Hallam's review of Tennyson's poems quoted earlier. Both criticisms centre on the point that the poet must not use the past to 'obliterate' the present'. It should also be noted that Prothero observes that Arnold 'expresses the unrest, the bewilderment, the perplexity of a doubting age' (p. 339), and that his poetry 'gathers up and reflects with minute fidelity the forces that were at work [in the age]' (p. 340). This echoes Arnold's own view that his poetry represents 'on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century'.

13 Burrows discusses Browning's Nonconformist background and says:

Arnold sees the Nonconformists as the leading exponents of middle-class Puritanism and hence of what he names 'Hebraism'--a force characterized by intense moral and religious earnestness, by a disposition to exert the will in action ('energy driving at practice') rather than to indulge in a free play of disinterested thought, by a 'paramount sense of the obligation of duty, self-control, and work', and by an excessive individualism ('doing what one likes').
(p. 6)

Burrows associates Arnold with 'Hellenism', which he calls, an ideal which expresses, surely, the notion of a traditional classicism: the beauty of proportion, the firm control of the rational intelligence, the

distaste of the lopsided, the incongruous, the ugly, the merely intense and violent, the mean and vulgar.

(pp. 6-7)

This is why Burrows feels that Arnold is never quite in sympathy with Browning's poetry, and sees something of 'the gentlemanly Oxonian's' attitude to 'uncivilized barbarians' in Arnold's view of Browning.

¹⁴ Letters to Clough, p. 97. Professor Drew in Poetry of Browning (p. 355) makes the point that at that time, 1848-49, Arnold's judgment of Browning's work could only be based on Paracelsus, Sordello, Dramatic Lyrics, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, and possibly some plays. 'It seems likely that Arnold had Paracelsus and Sordello particularly in mind: if so his criticism, though severe, is not altogether unjustified.' Dramatic Lyrics and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, however, contain some of Browning's finest shorter poems, and if Arnold did not take these into consideration when formulating his opinion then I doubt if Browning's later poetry would have completely altered his opinion (indeed poems such as Fifine at the Fair and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country would, if anything, have confirmed it). This is where I feel that Leonard Burrows' remarks about the basic differences in character between the two men become relevant. While Arnold may have come to respect Browning's powers of intellect, I do not believe that he ever appreciated Browning's acceptance of 'the world's multitudinousness' in his poetry. Arnold's concept of poetry and of life demanded a formal principle of order.

¹⁵ This is the method adopted by Philip Drew in Poetry of Browning (pp. 354-75). This can be used to supplement my approach by suggesting the development of the debate.

¹⁶ Philip Drew in Poetry of Browning writes: 'It is too large a topic to consider here how far Arnold's Culture and Anarchy is a contribution to the debate' (p. 374). Professor Drew does not suggest that Browning reacts to Culture and Anarchy in any of his poems, but it is possible that Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society (1871) is in part just such a reaction. There are many parallels between Browning's poem and the political and social debates which revolved around Arnold's Culture and Anarchy (1869) and Friendship's Garland (1871). Both of these works had been published earlier in periodicals and had attracted a great deal of interest. The subtitle of the first work could be applied to Browning's poem: 'an essay in Political and Social Criticism', and Browning's subtitle could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek comment on Arnold's social moralizing. In the essays which became Friendship's Garland, Arnold uses the Prussian Arminius to argue out his views, and Frederic Harrison in the Fortnightly Review, 11 (1867), 603-14, uses Arminius to criticize Arnold's essays. With the hyphenated German name so much in the fore of contemporary writings, Browning's Hohenstiel-Schwangau would almost certainly have brought to mind Arnold's Arminius von Thunder-ten-Tronckh. The many parallels between Browning's poem and these debates are too numerous to dismiss as mere coincidence. I can only offer a few examples here. In Letter III, 'I expostulate with Arminius on his revolutionary sentiments', the issue about 'government by your better self' (CPW V, 49) has much in common with the debate between Sagacity and the Head

Servant in Hohenstiel-Schwangau. In Culture and Anarchy the section, 'Doing as One Likes', is another central theme of Browning's poem:

I acquiesced
In doing what seemed best for me to do,
So as to please myself on the great scale.

(231-33)

As a Liberal with a Nonconformist background, Browning must have found some of Arnold's views provocative. Dawson and Pfordresher, the editors of Matthew Arnold, Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage, write:

Harrison shared with the entire liberal press the conviction that the 'liberal of the future' was elitist as well as self-contradictory. If culture does remain disinterested, seeking out the best, holding to sweetness and light, how can Arnold concern himself with opposing the meagre reforms of divorce, or the Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill? To delay reform in the name of future culture is to betray humanity for false, because vague and unrealizable ideals.

(p. 31)

Hohenstiel-Schwangau claims, 'I make the best of the old, nor try for new' (268), and, 'A conservator, call me, if you please, / Not a creator nor destroyer: one / Who keeps the world safe' (298-300). In these views he closely resembles Matthew Arnold. As a final example, compare Arnold's remarks in 'The Function of Criticism' with the Prince's 'No fresh force till the old have spent itself / Such seems the natural economy' (354-55). Arnold says, 'Force till right is ready; and till right is ready, force, the existing order of things, is justified, is the legitimate ruler' (CPW III, 265-66).

If Hohenstiel-Schwangau is accepted as part of the Browning-Arnold debate, then it demonstrates how widely the debate ranged. It also demonstrates a point which I shall make in the main text: Browning believes that poetry is in itself a criticism of life, and as such may legitimately tackle political and social criticism.

17 This criticism of Greek art is similar to Pater's view that 'the antique ideal' cannot 'contain the fulness of the experience of the modern world', or, as Browning says, 'To-day's brief passion limits their range'. Every moment brings new experiences which increase the limitations of Greek art.

18 The similarity of this passage to 'Old Pictures in Florence' was pointed out by Lawrence Postan III in 'Hazlitt and Browning on Greek Statuary'.

19 The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon, pp. 145-46 (23 October 1886).

20 Whistler makes a similar point: there 'never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation' (Mr Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock', p. 9). He is also specifically rejecting the idea of Greek perfection in art.

21 Like Browning, Pater also argues that 'the development of the various forms of art has corresponded to the development of the thoughts of man concerning himself, to the growing revelation of

the mind to itself' ('Winckelmann', The Renaissance. Works I, 230). But while Browning argues that the development of each art-form must correspond to the development of man, Pater argues that the growth of man has produced a movement of interest from the material art-forms to the more spiritual art-forms. He argues that 'sculpture corresponds to the unperplexed, emphatic outlines of Hellenic humanism; painting to the mystic depth and intricacy of the middle age; music and poetry have their fortune in the modern world' (p. 230). There is an element of this in Browning's thought. In 'Old Pictures in Florence', Browning associates sculpture with the Greek artists and painting with the medieval artists. In the 'Parleying with Charles Avison' he clearly regards music and poetry as the most spiritual of the art-forms, as the arts most capable of revealing soul.

22 'But this real estimate, the only true one, is liable to be superseded, if we are not watchful, by two other kinds of estimate, the historic estimate and the personal estimate, both of which are fallacious' (CPW IX, 163).

23 P. 1146. Cf. to 'De Lairese':
 the Past indeed
 Is past, gives way before Life's best and last
 The all including Future!

(XIII)

24 See DeVane, Handbook, pp. 440-41.

25 Altick and Loucks study this theme in some detail in Ch 10 of Browning's Roman Murder Story. The ultimate example of perverted human instinct and selfish reasoning is of course Guido.

26 DeVane in his Browning's Parleyings, p. 232, believes that stanza IV may refer to the Pre-Raphaelites. Oscar Maurer in 'William Morris and the Poetry of Escape' argues that 'De Lairese', lines 382-93, are 'very probably aimed at Morris' (p. 248), especially his Jason and Earthly Paradise. He feels that this passage in Browning's poem answers Morris' 'Apology', and argues that the 'Epilogue' to Pacchiarotto (1876), stanzas III, IV, and XX, also refer to The Earthly Paradise (p. 249, footnote 9). This article substantiates my argument that one must regard much of Victorian poetry and poetic criticism as part of a debate. Morris' poetry, and the criticism which praised it, are reactions to poetry which was overloaded with social, moral, or religious problems. Maurer quotes from the New York Times (1870):

We have grown somewhat uneasy of the modern metaphysical bards, who would set philosophy to music, and think no poem worthy of the modern name which does not propound a spiritual conundrum in every line, and unsettle a creed in every stanza.

(quoted p. 254)

This is very like Aristophanes' criticism of Euripides' poetry in Browning's Aristophanes' Apology. As I shall argue in the main text, this poem examines the main points in the subject-matter debate.

27 This has been generally accepted since A.W. Crawford's 'Browning's Cleon' (1927). Adrienne Munich has also shown strong connections to Tennyson's 'The Lotus Eaters' in her 'Emblems of Temporality in Browning's Cleon' (1978).

28 The introduction to the transcription reveals that Browning's main aim was to produce 'a mere strict bald version of thing by thing, or at least word pregnant with thing', to distil from the 'poem the ideas of the poet'. In Sordello Browning had already proved to himself that language cannot render 'perceptions whole'. The Agamemnon shows that the 'ideas of the poet' are not contained in the words as mere words. Browning's concern was to see just how far words are 'pregnant with thing'.

29 See DeVane, Handbook, pp. 376-78, p. 382. Clyde deL. Ryals in Browning's Later Poetry, sees the poem as another experiment to overcome the limitations of the dramatic monologue (p. 103). I would suggest that Browning is continuing his experiments with words and language. This can be seen in the way in which he handles the Herakles. In Balaustion's Adventure the Alcestis is Balaustion's interpretation of the play; the Herakles is much more of a straight translation (though put into a new context by being part of Browning's poem); and the Agamemnon is a bare transcript. His interest seems to be in how far the words in themselves contain the poet's conception. I would suggest 'that the Herakles holds no such central place in Aristophanes' Apology as the Alcestis holds in Balaustion's Adventure' (DeVane, Handbook, p. 376) because Browning has left the reader to work out for himself what the relation of the play is to the surrounding material. Browning has not included in the play his conception or interpretation of it.

30 A glance through Matthew Arnold, Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage, ed. Dawson and Pfordresher, shows that Aristophanes is very like the public view of Arnold in the 1860s and 1870s. Sidgwick describes Arnold as delivering 'profound truths and subtle observations with all the dogmatic authority and self-confidence of a prophet: at the same time titillating the public by something like the airs and graces, the playful affectations of a favourite comedian' (Henry Sidgwick, 'The Prophet of Culture', Macmillan's Magazine, 16 (1867), 271-80. Dawson and Pfordresher, pp. 209-24 (p. 210)). Fitzjames Stephen observes that Arnold verges 'sometimes on personal abuse, sometimes on low buffoonery' (Saturday Review, 12 (1861), 95-96. Dawson and Pfordresher, pp. 90-97 (p. 92)).

31 Henry Sidgwick writes: 'and though dogmatic, Mr Arnold is yet vague; because when he employs indefinite terms he does not attempt to limit their indefiniteness, but rather avails himself of it' (for the full reference see note 30, Dawson and Pfordresher, p. 211).

32 For the full reference see note 30. Dawson and Pfordresher, p. 96.

33 Shortly after this passage Arnold writes about the 'Athenian expedition to Syracuse', and he regards it as the turning-point in

the fortunes of Athens--'for from that date the intellectual and spiritual life of Greece was left without an adequate material basis of political and practical life; and both began inevitably to decay'. In Balaustion's Adventure, Browning chooses exactly this episode of the Athenian expedition to Syracuse as the starting-point of his poem (see DeVane, Handbook, p. 354). Browning also regards this period as a particularly momentous period of change, similar to his own era.

34 Quoted by Dawson and Pfordresher in Matthew Arnold, Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage, p. 31.

35 The reactions to Arnold's criticism reveal that many people felt that Arnold himself practised 'polemical practical criticism'. On 3 December 1864, in the Saturday Review (pp. 683-85), Fitzjames Stephen wrote: 'his self-imposed mission is to give good advice to the English people as to their manifold faults' (in Matthew Arnold, Prose Writings: The Critical Heritage, ed. Dawson and Pfordresher, pp. 117-26 (p. 118)).

Chapter Four

THE BOUNDARIES OF POETRY:

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF REALITY

He is not a Singer. That which distinguishes Poetry from Verse--that music, not of language only but of thought, which constitutes the grand peculiarity and enduring delight of poetry, forms but an insignificant element in his writings.

Realism in Art has Truth as an aim, Ugliness as a pitfall.

George Lewes, rev. Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day,
Leader, 1 (1850), p. 111

It is not valid to complain, 'Browning distresses me because he is trying to do something that poetry is not supposed to do', for this assumes that there are agreed a priori limits to what poetry can and cannot do. Browning plainly does not accept any such assumption. In rejecting it he is implicitly asserting the right of the poet to write about whatever he likes. In particular he is trying to win back territory once held by poetry and now lost to prose. If this enterprise is worthwhile, as I believe it to be, then it is so irrespective of the success or failure of individual poems.

Philip Drew, Poetry of Browning, p. 175

This chapter forms the counterpart to the previous chapter on the subject-matter of escape. Arnold wrote of his era that it was 'not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving:--but unpoetical' (Letters to Clough, p. 99). It was this belief, and its effect on poetry, which was studied in the last chapter. The two central tenets which emerged from the study of Arnold's theory, and which so obviously reflect the sentiment expressed in the letter to Clough, are that contemporary reality could not provide fit subjects for poetry, and by implication,

that 'there are agreed a priori limits to what poetry can and cannot do'. The quotations which head this chapter make it clear that Browning stands in opposition to these salient characteristics of what I called the poetry of escape.

The quotations suggest the real core of the difficulties of appreciating Browning's poetry--how is one to judge his poetry? Is it that Browning goes beyond what is usually understood by poetry, or is it that he does not attain what is usually understood by poetry? In either case it has to be admitted that there exists some general understanding of what poetry is, no matter how vague or imprecise. In this respect it is valid to complain that Browning is disturbing because his poetry does what one would not expect poetry to do, but, as Philip Drew says, it is not valid to complain that he does something which poetry should not do. The difference is crucial and relates back to what was discussed in Chapter Two: the contrast between the reader's expectations as to what poetry is, and Browning's explorations of what in fact poetry can do.

Even though Browning himself may not accept that there are any limits to what a poet may write about, the very fact that one can speak about 'poetic' and 'non-poetic' subjects assumes that there is some general notion of what constitutes a poetic subject. The final sentence of the quotation from Philip Drew demonstrates the problem of judging Browning's work. Browning asserts the right of the poet to write about whatever he likes, and in particular to write about matters now normally dealt with in prose. This Professor Drew accepts as a 'worthwhile' enterprise, 'irrespective of the success or failure of individual poems'. But on what basis are we to judge the success or failure of Browning's poems if we accept that Browning's aim is to go beyond traditional or

conventional interpretations of what is poetic? Also the success or failure of poems is surely the main, if not the only way by which one can judge the worth of the practical possibilities of a poetic enterprise. What I intend to do here is to argue that once again these are problems which concern not just Browning's poetry, but Victorian poetry as a whole.

As the last chapter demonstrated, Arnold's poetic enterprise was concerned with very similar aims to Browning's. His classical theory was intended to restore to poetry the status and range of a 'magister vitae'; in practice, however, the application of this theory constricted the range of poetic subject-matter and of poetic effect, and revealed that no traditional interpretation of poetry could achieve what was being asked of poetry. By putting these problems firmly in the context of Victorian poetics, I hope to prove that Browning does not demand an appreciation exclusively on his own terms, but on the terms of what his period sought to achieve in poetry. In other words, I am arguing that Browning must be judged primarily as a Victorian poet, and that this judgment can only be rendered if we perceive Browning's central relation to Victorian poetics as a whole. A more precise sense of what I mean here will emerge as this chapter develops.

George Lewes writes that 'the grand peculiarity and enduring delight of poetry, forms but an insignificant element in [Browning's] writings' (my emphasis). I stress the phrase 'the grand peculiarity' of poetry because this returns to one of the main issues of the last chapter-- what John L. Tupper called 'the specific existence' of the art-form. The idea of a specific or peculiar existence of poetry, of a poetry with fixed 'wholesome and regulative laws' (Arnold), was undermined and challenged by the demand that poetry be relevant to, and part of,

contemporary life. In Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830-1870, Isobel Armstrong notes that critics attempted 'to invent new categories different from the traditional 'kinds' . . . [and] which define poetry in terms of its content' (p. 13).¹ She also observes a 'tendency to see a distinction between an autonomous, ideal, self-derived, imaginative creation and the poetry which is directly dependent on and evolving out of the circumstances of the age in which it is written' (p. 13). What Isobel Armstrong draws attention to, then, is a critical attempt to reassess poetry, to recognize 'new categories' of poetry. She also recognizes the essential opposition between what I called the poetry of escape ('an autonomous, ideal, self-derived, imaginative creation'), and the kind of poetry with which this chapter is concerned.

One of the examples she gives of this new critical tendency is H.B. Forman's review in 1869 of The Ring and the Book. Forman distinguishes between the Idyllic and Psychological Schools of poetry and recognizes in these schools 'what is essentially characteristic of the present era of poetry--what is as new from a technical point of view as is the present form of novel' (p. 329). He goes on, 'the innovations of the two schools in question . . . are not merely superficial, but involve quite new principles in the technical procedures of literature, thus opening up new possibilities to future workers'. He describes the Idyllic and Psychological Schools as being 'intimately connected with modern ideas', and says:

the Idyllic School is valuable by virtue of the method developed in the treatment of contemporary subjects otherwise than dramatically--the faculty of making exquisite narrative pictures of our middle-class life in its more simple phases; and the Psychological School has a wide applicability to the idealisation of the intellectual and emotional phases of being which, in modern city life, are so intensified as to preponderate immensely in importance over the life of physical

activity. To treat these classes of subjects with adequate freshness, it was necessary that new forms and methods should be invented. (p. 330)

Like Browning in his 'Essay on Shelley', Forman clearly relates the development of poetry to the historical, and particularly the intellectual, development of mankind. The Schools which open up 'new possibilities to future workers' in poetry are 'intimately connected with modern ideas'. But what is most interesting is Forman's statement that in order 'to treat these classes of subjects [of "modern city life"] with adequate freshness, it was necessary that new forms and methods should be invented'.

Forman believes that his observations apply to 'what is essentially characteristic of the present era of poetry': he is not narrowly discussing Browning's poetry. In other words, Forman denies that there are any agreed a priori limits to poetic subject-matter or poetic expression, and his comments clearly suggest that the innovations of Browning's poetry should be seen as being characteristic of a general exploration by Victorian poets and critics into the nature and function of poetry. If poetry is seldom defined in the age, it is because it is undergoing a process of definition--a reinterpretation. The character of the best Victorian criticism and poetry is exploratory rather than conclusive. The Ring and the Book, for example, is not a model for modern epic, but it demonstrates that an epic can be written on such a subject and in such a manner.

At the conclusion of his review of The Ring and the Book, Forman explicitly draws attention to a new interpretation of 'epic', and it is an interpretation which is largely based on subject-matter:

The idea that epics have 'died out with Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods,' is one which is obviously absurd, even without practical evidence to the contrary, and has arisen from the false notion that 'heroic' is a term applicable only to wars and large actions. Now that Walt Whitman has written the Epic of Democracy on the other side of the Atlantic, and Browning, on this side, has furnished what may be fitly termed the Epic of Psychology, the idea of the decease of the epic is more than ever a dead idea. The day has long gone by when heroism meant pugilism, and the might of man was measured by magnitude of muscle. (p. 357)

There is also an indication that Forman recognizes a blurring of the form of the epic genre. He sees Browning's poem as 'a great lesson on the adaptability of the strict monologue form for epic uses' (p. 336). As with Euripides in Aristophanes' Apology, Browning should be recognized as one who 'in art . . . extended bounds' (1690), as one who explores the limits of his art.

A. THE RING AND THE BOOK AND VICTORIAN EPIC

The subject is more appropriate to a novel, a historical novel, than to an epic, but the treatment it receives is concerned with neither. With The Ring and the Book Browning . . . demonstrates that a certain form of poetry will no longer serve.

Barbara Melchiori, Browning's Poetry of Reticence (1968), pp. 192-93

We are reading neither prose nor poetry; it is too real for the ideal, and too ideal for the real.

Henry James, 'Browning's Inn Album', The Nation, 22 (1876), 49-50 (p. 50)

We are not contending that fiction should become fact, or that no dramatic incident is genuine, unless it could be sworn to before a jury; but simply that fiction should not be falsehood and delirium.

Thomas Carlyle, 'German Playwrights' (1829), Works XXVI, 389

'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?'

The Ring and the Book (I, 455-56)

These quotations suggest the main themes of this part of the chapter, and indeed of this chapter, on the boundaries of poetry, as a whole. I shall argue that The Ring and the Book is a reinterpretation of the epic genre, and, more generally, a reinterpretation of the nature and function of poetry. The quotations also suggest the question of the truth of poetry and of the relation of poetry to reality. Browning's poem examines these matters in some detail, and a major concern of this part of the chapter will be to study Browning's ideas and to suggest that they are central to his understanding of poetry, and to his ideas

about the proper subjects for serious poetry.

In Chapter Two I examined a passage from 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', here I shall take up some of the issues raised by this examination and relate them to the concerns of this section. In 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' Browning argues that the vital power or essence of poetry is what he calls the 'sap / Of prose-experience'. If the essence of poetry is 'prose-experience' then surely the differences between poetry and prose are superficial? Barbara Melchiori suggests that the subject-matter of The Ring and the Book is 'more appropriate to a novel, a historical novel, than to an epic'. She then says that with this poem Browning 'demonstrates that a certain form of poetry will no longer serve', but will this form of poetry no longer serve because Browning has chosen a subject 'more appropriate to a novel'? She also observes that Browning's treatment of his subject is connected with neither the epic nor the novel, and this echoes Henry James' criticism of The Inn Album that it is 'neither prose nor poetry'.

In the same year, 1869, that H.B. Forman hailed Browning as the leader of a new school of poetry, Alfred Austin argued that Browning was not a poet at all but a 'poetico-philosophical hybrid'. He says, 'there ever remains a substantial difference . . . between the country of poetry and the country of prose, between poetical power and instinct and philosophical power and proclivity' (p. 321). The difference is described earlier in the vague statement that 'prose thoughts, so to speak, [come] from below--poetical thoughts, so to speak, from above' (pp. 320-21). There is something here of Henry James' distinction between prose and poetry as being their respective concern with the real and the ideal. In 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' the ideal poet is a 'proser and poet, perfect in both kinds!' By saying 'in both kinds', Browning acknowledges that prose

and poetry are distinct, but, as with his views on objective and subjective poetry in the 'Essay on Shelley', perfection is a blend of both.

Before going on it is necessary to clarify what Browning means by 'prose-experience'. His meaning becomes clearer if the term is seen in the context of contemporary periodical criticism, and in the context of the poem as a whole. For example, in his 'Review of Some Poems by Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold' (1853), Clough's contrast between contemporary poetry and the novel is basically one of subject-matter. His argument is that the novel is more popular because it deals with 'the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned' (p. 357), that is, with the prosaic commonplace aspects of life, with the real rather than the ideal. Browning's 'prose-experience' clearly has much in common with Clough's view that poetry must maintain a relationship with reality.

The meaning of the 'sap / Of prose-experience' can also be understood from the context of the poem. Jochanan's students say:

Eden's tree [of knowledge] must hold unplucked
Some apple, sure, has never tried thy tooth,
Juicy with sapience thou hast sought, not sucked?
(37-39)

'Sap' is knowledge, and Jochanan's argument is that his knowledge has never been put to the test in life: his whole aim is to gain experience of life. This is what he calls 'prose-experience' and it is this which provides the 'test of truth'. But poetry is not pure 'prose-experience': the 'sap / Of prose-experience' is blended with fancy, 'fancy wells up through corrective fact'. 'Corrective fact' seems to mean the same as 'prose-experience'. The connection between poetry and reality is

essential: 'wanting sap / Of prose-experience . . . song-sprouts . . .
wither', 'Fancy wells up through corrective fact: / Missing which test
of truth . . . the pact / Is broken'. Browning clearly intends 'prose-
experience' to mean an experience of real life. If poetry has no
contact with reality then it lacks 'substance' (500).

Jochanan's experience of being a poet, like all his other experiences
of life, does not satisfy him, but this is because he does not accept the
'test of truth'. In practice he finds that factual reality exposes his
poetic 'truths' as 'falsehood' (529). In writing of the Future his
poetry sinks 'to fog, confounded in the flats / O' the Present!' (520-21).
In writing of the Past, 'dead fancies . . . no sooner touched the mark /
They aimed at--fact--than all at once they found / Their film-wings freeze'
(525-27). It is important to see that Jochanan does not attempt to write
about the Present, and in each case, in writing about the Future or the
Past, his poetry is based on 'fancies' or 'dreams'.

Jochanan's final 'strange and new / Discovery' (726-27), is that
'this life proves a wine-press--blends / Evil and good' (727-28). In
lines which immediately bring to mind 'Pisgah-Sights. I' he goes on:

'how seem
The intricacies now, of shade and shine,
Oppugnant natures--Right and Wrong, we deem

'Irreconcilable? O eyes of mine,
Freed now of imperfection, ye avail
To see the whole sight, nor may uncombine

'Henceforth what, erst divided, caused you quail--
So huge the chasm between the false and true,
The dream and the reality!'

(745-53)

The obvious point is that the poet must work from 'this life', from
'this world', as he says, in the 'Essay on Shelley'. The whole argument

of 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' echoes the conclusion of 'Parleying with Gerard de Lairese':

do, and nowise dream!
 Earth's young significance is all to learn.
 (XIV)

In the stanzas quoted from 'Jochanan Hakkadosh' the sage reaches true understanding when he can 'see the whole sight' (my emphasis). The pattern, or meaning, of life becomes clear, and what was deemed 'irreconcilable', when seen with this perfect vision, cannot now be 'uncombine[d]'. This is the true poet's vision: 'the chasm between the false and true, / The dream and the reality' is bridged.²

In the light of 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', Henry James' criticism of The Inn Album, that it is 'neither prose nor poetry; it is too real for the ideal, and too ideal for the real', very neatly expresses Browning's poetic intention. It is Browning's point that this high poetic vision is only achieved when the poet accepts life as it is, when he sees, as Browning says in the 'Essay on Shelley', 'perfection in imperfection', and does not attempt to understand and interpret the world according to his own preconceived ideas. The truth of poetry depends on poetry maintaining its relation to 'prose-experience', to 'this life'.

From the opening quotations it is obvious that this matter of the relation of poetry to reality or truth was of major importance to the Victorian poetic debates. Carlyle once again expresses the Victorian uneasiness with serious fiction. If something was to be considered as more than amusement or momentary pleasure, then it had to prove its relation to truth--'fiction should not be falsehood and delirium'. Yet art cannot be art without the creative effort of the artist, so that the

reality from which the artist works is selected, shaped and interpreted. The central question which Carlyle's statement suggests is 'Does art remain true to reality or by being art is it by necessity no longer true to reality?' Carlyle maintains that he does not contend that 'fiction should become fact', yet in some ways this is what was sought. Browning nicely captures the slightly condescending tone of a reader with a modern realistic outlook on life:

'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe?'

This immediately brings to mind Bentham's 'The poet always stands in need of something false'. Poetry, if it has no relation to reality, can claim to be a pleasant and harmless amusement, but finally it must be dismissed as something of no serious value since it is 'make-believe'.

The Ring and the Book is the great epic of the Victorian debates about poetic subject-matter. In many ways it is a piece of poetic theory simultaneously proved by practice: the theory is contained in the poem itself. The extent to which the poem is an exposition of Browning's own ideas about poetry is obvious not only from the title and its metaphorical meaning, or from the discussion on art in the first and last books of the poem, but most especially from the weakness and relative triviality of the ostensible subject. This is exactly the point which Carlyle made: 'It is a wonderful book, one of the most wonderful poems ever written. I re-read it all through--all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines, and only wants forgetting' (quoted by DeVane, Handbook, p. 346). It is Browning's conception and treatment of this most unlikely subject for poetry which make the work 'wonderful'.

The title, The Ring and the Book, draws attention not to the subject, the story of an old Roman murder trial, but to the process of the creation

of the poem. In fact what Browning does in The Ring and the Book is to illustrate the irrelevance of subject-matter, and the essential importance of the work of art as a whole. The subject is 'rough ore', the poem a 'rare gold ring' (XII, 865, 869). The emphasis falls on the artist's vision, the gold (the truth) he sees in the rough ore (the subject taken from 'prose-experience'), and on the artist's power to shape and mould this gold into a work of art which will reveal the poet's insight into this truth of the subject to the reader. What Browning's elaborate metaphor implies is that content (as distinct from subject-matter), and form, are of equal importance, and together make up the 'rare gold ring of verse'.

This emphasis on the experience of the whole is crucial. The poem was published in four separate volumes between November 1868 and February 1869. Reactions to the early volumes were, in several cases, unfavourable or cautious. In 1868, Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to William Allingham that 'it is full of wonderful work, but it seems to me that whereas other poets are the more liable to get incoherent the more fanciful their starting-point happens to be, the thing that makes Browning drunk is to give him a dram of prosaic reality, and unluckily this time the "gum-tickler" is less like pure Cognac than Seven Dials gin' (Letters II, 679-80). Rossetti suggests two things: first, that the subject is too low for poetry, and secondly, that Browning is 'incoherent'.

Rossetti changed his opinion as more volumes appeared, and Browning seems to have anticipated such reactions. He begins by addressing the 'British Public' as 'ye who like me not' (I, 1379), and ends by saying 'So, British Public, who may like me yet' (XII, 831). Browning implies as does his ring-metaphor, that the beauty and significance of the work

lie in the experience of the whole of the poem. This experience of the whole is an epic experience, but it is not achieved by what could be regarded as a traditionally epic subject or epic treatment. The first part of this section centres on Browning's reinterpretation of the epic genre. In the second part I shall look at this reinterpretation with close reference to the poem itself.

I

Boyd Litzinger in 'The Structural Logic of The Ring and the Book' observes that 'it is quite possible to treat The Ring and the Book as a nineteenth-century version of the literary epic, and one can find most, if not all, of the devices traditionally associated with epic poetry' (p. 106). This is true, however, only if one recognizes that these traditional aspects are subtly and deliberately modified or questioned.³ In fact, Browning seems to set out to prove that the effects of the highest form of poetry, epic, can be achieved by a subject and form of presentation more commonly associated with the novel.

In 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' Blougram mentions Gigadibs'

lively lightsome article we took
Almost for the true Dickens,--what's its name?
'The Slum and Cellar, or Whitechapel life
Limned after dark!'

(949-52)

Carlyle called Browning's subject 'an Old Bailey story' and Rossetti likened it to 'Seven Dials gin'. The subject-matter is very much in the territory of the Victorian novelist. Moreover, Browning seems to have

accepted the challenge levelled at 'the serial tale'. In 1851 a reviewer in The Prospective Review wrote:

The serial tale . . . is probably the lowest artistic form yet invented; that, namely, which affords the greatest excuse for unlimited departures from dignity, propriety, consistency, completeness, and proportion. . . . With whatever success men of genius may be able to turn this form to their highest purposes, they cannot make it a high form of art.⁴

In many ways Browning's poem seemed open to these charges.

Although there was nothing unusual in publishing the poem in four volumes, at about monthly intervals, Browning's grouping of the books of his poem within these volumes bears some resemblance to the serial novelist's technique: he holds back the desired 'resolution' of each volume and makes it the beginning of the following volume. 'Tertium Quid' opens volume two, but clearly concludes the sequence of volume one; 'Pompilia' opens volume three, but again her monologue obviously belongs to the 'Count Guido Franceschini' / 'Giuseppi Caponsacchi' grouping; and after the two lawyers the reader is of course desirous to hear the judgment of the Pope, but this is held back until the last volume. But the resemblance to the serial novel is superficial, just as the subject itself is only superficially trivial and sordid.

The arrangement of the books within the volumes not only draws the reader on to the next instalment, but also prevents the separate volumes from seeming complete in themselves. The individual volumes do lack 'dignity, propriety, consistency, completeness, and proportion': it is only when the whole poem is read that Browning's 'highest purpose' becomes 'a high form of art'. In its complete form the poem can be seen to consist of the obligatory twelve books of the epic genre, but this suggests not that Browning was particularly mindful of this

convention, but that Browning was making it clear that such a subject and such a treatment could achieve epic status. The power of epic poetry does not come from fixed 'boundaries and wholesome regulative laws', as Arnold put it.

Boyd Litzinger also says: 'Like the epic poets, Browning has not invented his story but has recovered it from the (very obscure) literature of the past' (p. 106). This again needs qualifying. Browning's story cannot be regarded in the same light as Tennyson's Idylls of the King or Morris' The Earthly Paradise: both of these epics are based on 'literature of the past', a literature of myth and legend. Browning's story is based on documents and letters pertaining to a Roman murder case. The Old Yellow Book belongs more to factual history than to literature. This point, and the apparent triviality of the subject, is emphasized by Browning's 'epic catalogue', which is another convention of the epic which Browning modifies.

'Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
 White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
 Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
 (Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
 Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
 Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
 Polished and rough.

(I, 53-59)

This goes on for a further twenty-three lines of vividly described paraphernalia. This should not be dismissed merely as Browning's love of the grotesque. It exactly describes the character of Browning's epic and its difference from conventional epic.

First, Browning is describing a 'prose-experience', an actual event. The circumstances of his inspiration are singularly prosaic, illustrating his belief that 'rock's the song-soil rather, surface hard and bare'

(conclusion to Dramatic Idyls: Second Series). Certainly Browning tells us to 'Mark the predestination!' (40) in his finding of the Old Yellow Book, but there is nothing here of the experience of Christopher Smart or of René Gentilhomme. In The Ring and the Book it is clear that Browning finds his 'fire' in the 'flint', there is no sudden 'flashed lightning' from heaven (The Two Poets of Croisic, XXXII). Secondly, on a metaphorical level, Browning is using his 'catalogue' to say that among the 'odds and ends' of everyday life lie concealed truths of epic importance. H.B. Forman, in 'Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology' (1869), comments on just this point:

The story, gathered from the old book, as it stands there with its rags and tatters of human frailty obtruded everywhere, would scarcely be deemed edifying: it is only when the poet has pared off the rags and tatters, and brought forward the truths and treasures which only eyes such as his have power to discern beneath, that Beauty comes with edification in her train. (p. 340)

Forman's emphasis falls on the poet's depth of vision and on his ability to make the reader see the beauty of truths which would normally go undiscerned.

Browning's consistent choice of unpoetic subjects should be seen as part of the Victorian poetic debates, and particularly as part of the debate about what constitutes the beauty of art. It should be observed that in his review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, George Lewes makes a general comment that 'Realism in Art has Truth as an aim, Ugliness as a pitfall'. Lewes regards Browning as being part of this general concern with realism. Lewes' problem is that he cannot see any way of reconciling the realism he admires and defends in Browning's poetry, with its lack of music and beauty, which he regards as the essence of poetry, its

'grand peculiarity and enduring delight'. But in 1849, in an article called 'The Ethics of Art', Coventry Patmore said:

It is a mistake, in modern times . . . to suppose that its highest and fittest . . . [object] is the direct representation of beauty. . . . Beauty is one among the many realities which Art now grasps. The artist reveals reality whenever he exhibits or suggests the true relation of any object to the rest of the universe. Such relation constitutes its reality; reality, in this sense, is by no means a familiar sight to ordinary men, and the revelation of it seems calculated to be extremely edifying.
(p. 447)

By comparing Patmore with Forman, one can see that the beauty under consideration is a beauty of understanding, of intellectual and emotional harmony, rather than the aesthetic beauty of the art object regarded in isolation from the life which surrounds it. In the 'Essay on Shelley' Browning speaks of the poet's task of 'beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection' (my emphasis, p. 71). Again the main point is the poet's power of perception, and especially his ability to see 'perfection' in the imperfections of reality.

This emphasis is a dominant feature of Victorian poetics. It can be seen in Clough's review of Alexander Smith and Matthew Arnold:

Could [poetry] not attempt to convert into beauty and thankfulness . . . the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned; introduce into business and weary task-work a character and a soul of purpose and reality; intimate to us relations which . . . we still . . . retain to some central, celestial fact? (p. 357)

In 'Maurice de Guérin', Arnold describes 'the grand power of poetry [as] its interpretative power . . . the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of

our relations with them' (CPW III, 12-13). In the quotations from Patmore, Clough, and Arnold the word 'relation' or 'relations' is used. The poet is expected, as Browning put it in 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', 'to see the whole sight', to convert the discordant elements into a harmonious whole, or to relate them to some higher order. In Modern Painters I, Ruskin writes:

Nay, the ugly gutter, that stagnates over the drain-bars in the heart of the foul city, is not altogether base; down in that, if you will look deep enough you may see the dark serious blue of far-off sky, and the passing of pure clouds. It is at your own will that you see, in that despised stream, either the refuse of the street, or the image of the sky. So it is with almost all other things that we unkindly despise. Now, this far-seeing is just the difference between the great and the vulgar painter: the common man knows the road-side pool is muddy, and draws its mud; the great painter sees beneath and behind the brown surface.
(Works III, 496-97)

The resemblance of what Ruskin writes here to what Browning does with his 'sordid' story in The Ring and the Book is striking. I offer two final examples.

In a review of 1856, George Brimley writes: 'we believe that Mr Browning might, had he chosen, have become the interpreter of our modern life. . . . We believe that he could have sung the passions and the thoughts of our time with a lyric intensity which would have purified the rough ore of our life of its prosaic dross' (my emphasis).⁵ In The Ring and the Book Browning uses exactly this metaphor and speaks of 'the rough ore' being 'rounded to a ring' (XII, 865). In 1849 Aubrey De Vere, reviewing Henry Taylor's The Eve of the Conquest, suggests an interpretation of poetry which is remarkably like Browning's poetic argument in The Ring and the Book, and indeed some of the metaphors and vocabulary are very similar. De Vere suggests that the poet should keep

to 'the highways of life, leaving its byways to those who lack the faculty which elicits the beautiful from common things'. De Vere uses something like Browning's ring metaphor to describe poetic truth: 'All species of truth, in fine, are the better for mutual fellowship; the breed is the sounder for being crossed; and the humble truth of literal fact is the alloy, which only debases the ideal truth of poetry to make it malleable' (p. 363). The differences are significant: for Browning the alloy is fancy, the crude impure gold is fact. Browning has strengthened the relationship between poetic truth and reality. Yet even this is foreshadowed in De Vere's theory: 'The most common events of human life are instinct with latent principles, which, if at all times detected . . . would at all times approve themselves divine' (p. 363). This is exactly the line which Browning takes in The Ring and the Book and, as I shall show later, in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (and of course in a great many of his other poems).

The choice of subject in itself is not important: the test of the poet is whether his vision and his skill of presentation can perceive and reveal the 'divine' in even 'the most common events'. Most of what De Vere writes in this article is of relevance to Browning's work. The whole article stresses truth in poetry and depth of vision, both of which are central to Browning's poetic theory, but most important of all is that De Vere, and the other critics quoted here, demonstrate that Browning was developing a poetic theory and practice which was part of the general critical movement of the time.

The Ring and the Book is unquestionably a reinterpretation of the epic genre, but it is a reinterpretation which must be recognized as arising out of Victorian poetics as a whole. It is Browning's highly significant contribution to the debate: it is not a completely eccentric

departure from Victorian poetic thought. Forman calls Browning's poem 'The Epic of Psychology'. He describes the 'subject' as being 'rich in characters, replete with vivid variety of life, teeming with complexities of intellect and emotion, full of dark unexplored mental places' (p. 337). In his conclusion he notes that the interest of man has advanced from an interest in man's 'physical powers' to his 'intellectual and moral force' (p. 357).

Forman's views reflect a shift of understanding of what is meant by heroic character. In his Preface of 1853, Arnold asks, 'Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido,--what modern poem presents personages as interesting, even to us moderns, as these personages of "an exhausted past"?' (CPW I, 4). In a somewhat similar vein, Aubrey De Vere, in 1849, wrote:

Modern representations of character have for the most part been feeble, vague, and superficial. . . . If modern society has reached a higher average of decorous virtue; yet individual robustness,--and therefore character,--like intellectual greatness, is rarer than it was in ruder times. The aids and appliances which are now multiplied round men, enfeeble them. (p. 360)

He then goes on to argue that individuality is lost, as is 'simplicity of character', 'complexity of life . . . makes little things great, and shuts great things out from our view. But, without simplicity, ideality cannot exist' (p. 361).

E.S. Dallas in The Gay Science (1866) makes similar observations, but, like Forman, regards the transition from physical heroism to intellectual and moral heroism as part of the development of literature. 'The withering of the hero and the flourishing of the private individual . . . [is] the most salient characteristic of our time, [and] is but the last and most complete development of a tendency which belongs to modern

art and literature more or less from their first dawn, and separates them, as by a great gulf, from the art, the literature, and life antique' (II, 325-26). In Browning's epic the interest is unquestionably not in the action of the piece, but in the motives behind the acts. In the poem there is no conventional hero,⁶ and the concentration falls very much on the private individual (the thoughts and choices of individual members of a society). As I argued in the previous chapter, 'Tray' deals exactly with this change from the conventional warrior hero and Romantic super-man to the heroic or non-heroic act of the ordinary private 'standers-by'.⁷ The action is the moral decision of the individual when forced to make a crucial choice, which tests and reveals his character or soul.

This scaling down of the hero, and the interiorisation of the heroic action (that is, the thoughts and motives for the act become more important than the act itself), is clearly evident in Browning's handling of the central myth of The Ring and the Book. The importance of the myth can be gleaned from the fact that Browning consciously changes the date of the rescue of Pompilia from April 29 to April 23, St George's Day (DeVane, Handbook, 339). The St George/Perseus myth becomes a Caponsacchi/Robert Browning myth. The heroism of the legendary warrior hero becomes the intellectual and moral heroism of the factual private man.

While many parallels have been recognized between Browning's rescue of E.B.B. and Caponsacchi's rescue of Pompilia, I feel that one particular Browning letter to E.B.B. makes an important contribution to an understanding of how Browning regarded Caponsacchi's heroism in The Ring and the Book. The letter of 25 September 1845 bears a striking resemblance to the Pompilia/Caponsacchi situation. Browning writes:

I wholly sympathize . . . with the highest, wariest, pride & love for you, and the proper jealousy and vigilance they entail--but now, and here, the jewel is not being over guarded, but ruined, cast away. And whoever is privileged to interfere should do so in the possessor's own interest--all common sense interferes--all rationality against absolute no-reason at all . . . and you ask whether you ought to obey this no-reason?--I will tell you: all passive obedience and implicit submission of will and intellect is by far too easy, if well considered, to be the course prescribed by God to Man in this life of probation--for they evade probation altogether, tho' foolish people think otherwise. (Kintner I, 212-13)

He goes on:

but there is no reward proposed for the feat of breathing, and a great one for that of believing--consequently there must go a great deal more of voluntary effort to this latter than is implied in the getting absolutely rid of it at once, by adopting the direction of an infallible church, or private judgment of another--for all our life is some form of religion, and all our action some belief, and there is but one law, however modified, for the greater and the less. (Kintner I, 213).⁸

Mr Barrett and Guido share an improper 'jealousy and vigilance' and the ruining of a 'jewel'. The stress falls on the abnormal situation, which Browning sees as a test, as part of 'this life of probation', and like Caponsacchi he feels compelled to 'interfere', and to reject 'passive obedience and implicit submission of will and intellect'. But it is not so much the details which are of interest as the main ideas which are expressed here, and the way in which these ideas relate to Browning's poetic theory.

First, it is clear that the St George/Perseus myth is given a basis in 'prose-experience': 'fancy wells up through corrective fact'. 'Fancy', as represented by the myths of St George and of Perseus, has been verified by Browning's own experiences in real life, and by the

'facts' of the Caponsacchi story as interpreted by Browning in the light of his own experience. Therefore, while Browning alters the facts of the Old Yellow Book by changing the date of Pompilia's rescue, he does not alter the 'truth'. The myths are used to reveal the timeless significance of Caponsacchi's heroism.

Secondly, the letter makes it clear what Browning regards as heroism. At the end of his letter he sums up his argument by saying: 'The hard thing . . . this is all I want to say . . . is to act on one's own best conviction--not to abjure it and accept another will' (Kintner I, 213-14). Heroism is to accept the 'probation' of life, and not to 'evade probation': it is to strive to make the correct choice or judgment. This choice becomes Browning's basis for all that is epic.

In the second quotation from Browning's letter, the 'voluntary effort' of believing, of choosing to commit oneself to a certain cause or faith, is seen by Browning as being that which decides 'all our life' and 'all our action'. In his letter to Isa Blagden of 19 January 1870, about Tennyson's The Holy Grail and Other Poems, Browning writes: 'Here is an Idyll about a knight being untrue to his friend. . . . I should judge the conflict in the knight's soul the proper subject to describe: Tennyson thinks he should describe . . . anything but the soul' (Dearest Isa, p. 327). The action, as seen by Browning, is an internal one, centering on the knight's dilemma of choice. The externals of this action or conflict are unimportant, and hence, as was shown by 'Tray', it little matters whether the character involved is a knight or a dog, or whether the action is set in the picturesque middle ages or in modern times.

G.K. Chesterton does not get it quite right when he says that the 'fundamental idea in The Ring and the Book' is that 'Browning says,

"I will show you the relations of men to heaven by telling you a story out of a dirty Italian book of criminal trials from which I select one of the meanest and most completely forgotten" (Robert Browning, p. 164). Browning's delight with the Old Yellow Book is not exactly that it provides such an unlikely subject for epic, but that it answers so precisely his idea of what a subject for epic should be. In the letter to Isa Blagden, Browning says that 'the proper subject' is 'the conflict in the knight's soul'. In The Ring and the Book, the Pope says, 'Life's business being just the terrible choice' (X, 1237), and,

Life is probation and the earth no goal
 But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
 Which means, in man, as good as reach the goal,--
 Why institute that race, his life, at all?
 (X, 1435-38)

For Browning, 'the relations of men to heaven' are revealed in 'the terrible choice'.

The Old Yellow Book provided Browning with a subject whose epic qualities depended on Browning analyzing and discovering the choices, and the motives for the choices, made by the individuals in the old Roman murder trial. The reader's ability to recognize the epic qualities in the poem depends upon a similar, though lesser, power of discernment and judgment. In effect, Browning creates a poem which involves judgments by the characters, the poet, and the reader. The poem itself, then, becomes an experience of 'life's business being just the terrible choice', an epic experience for 'the private individual', the poet and the reader.

Browning concludes his epic by relating the value of his poem both to art and to life:

So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside
 (XII, 862-63)

'Suffice the eye' refers to the aesthetic pleasure and beauty of the poem as a work of art, but 'save the soul' suggests that the poem has the power to affect life itself. It does this by being an experience in life, involving moral action, what Forman calls the exercise of man's 'intellectual and moral force'. For Browning the poem is an event to which the reader must react: it is not a mere collection of words complete in themselves. Art may 'do the thing shall breed the thought [in the reader], / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word' (XII, 856-57).

These ideas are extremely important in that they attempt to solve the dilemma of the division between art and life (a major issue in Victorian poetics which I discussed in the introduction to the second part of the thesis). Browning looks beyond the obvious solution of concentrating on a contemporary subject-matter to seek a deeper, and less transient, relationship between poetry and reality. Browning's intention is to turn the poem from being a work of art detached and external to life, complete in itself, into being an actual experience in life, into a process of analysis and discovery in which the reader himself is finally the synthesist.

The Ring and the Book is unquestionably more an epic of 'analysis and discovery' than of 'synthesis and exposition'. These phrases from 'The Function of Criticism' (1864) are very similar to what Browning wrote as his headings to Sordello (1863). The headings to Book V, lines 480-625 are:

He asserts the poet's rank and right, basing these on their proper ground, recognizing true dignity in service, whether successively that of epoist, dramatist, or, so to call him, analyst, who turns in due course synthetist. (my emphasis)

In 1869 Alfred Austin devoted several pages of his article, 'The Poetry of the Period', to a discussion of these terms.

Like Arnold, Austin regards poetry as 'synthesis' rather than 'analysis'. He writes that Browning is,

a subtle, profound, conscious psychologist, who scientifically gets inside souls, and, having scrutinised their thoughts and motives in a prose and methodical fashion, then makes them give the result, as if they had been scrutinising themselves, in verse. This latter operation Mr Browning evidently imagines is synthesis. There never was a more ludicrous mistake. . . . Going about seizing upon objects and submitting them to analysis, even though synthesis be then superadded, will by no means produce poetry. (pp. 323-24)

In the midst of this diatribe against Browning's poetry, Austin adds a footnote explaining 'the difficulty of defining poetry', but assures his readers that 'we can say in any particular instance what is not poetry'. In fact Austin's article is quite remarkable for the way in which it recognizes Browning's innovations in poetry but completely misinterprets them or fails to see the significance of them.

I have been indicating the ways in which Browning's epic differs from conventional notions of what an epic is, and at the same time I have attempted to show that Browning intended the poem to contribute to the various debates about poetry, and particularly about the proper subject-matter of the highest form of poetry--the epic. But from the paragraph above it would also seem that Browning quite consciously 'extended [the] bounds' of his art beyond what was conventionally understood by poetry. Alfred Austin denies that the poet should be an analyser:

It is not the province of the poet to perform any such operation. It is the province of such men as Hartley, James Mill, and Professor Bain. . . . Having a distinct comprehension of their office and its limits, they have accordingly kept within the sphere--the sphere of deep prose thoughts as opposed to that of lofty poetical thoughts . . . to which their talents and task naturally belong. (p. 325)

Austin makes analysis the province of philosophers. In 'The Function of Criticism', Arnold makes 'the grand work of literary genius . . . a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery' (CPW III, 261). 'It is the business of the critical power. . . . to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas' (p. 261). Both Austin and Arnold explicitly deny the province of analysis and discovery to the poet; that province belongs to the philosophical, or, more generally, 'the critical power'.

The issue is not about whether poetry can be about philosophical matters, nor is it about whether any philosophy expressed by a poet is sound or unsound as philosophy. The issue concerns the nature and function of poetry itself. Austin compares Browning to an 'anatomical professor'. His point is that Browning does not create 'an organism, a growth, a vitality' (p. 324), he merely dissects and analyzes objects. In a letter to Clough of 1848-49, Arnold writes that poets like Browning 'will not be patient neither understand that they must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness' (Letters to Clough, p. 97). Arnold suggests that Browning's poetry is premature in that he works with 'the world's multitudinousness' before a critical power has shaped it and ordered it. He feels that Browning obtains 'but a confused multitudinousness', which implies that, like Austin, he believes that Browning fails to

produce the work of 'literary genius', 'a work of synthesis and exposition'.

The idea of poetic synthesis is central to Victorian poetic theory, If one studies the contemporary criticisms of Browning's poetry, and allows for different points of emphasis and different modes of expression, one can see that the main criticism is that the poetry is 'obscure' or 'difficult', that it has, what I have called, an 'unsolved' quality. It is this quality which Browning attempts to explain to Ruskin in the letter which I made the foundation of Chapter Two, on Browning's poetic theory. From the letter it is clear that the whole basis of Browning's poetry rests on the fact that he presents the reader with 'touches and bits of outlines'. The poetic 'synthesis' is not obvious, and this is quite deliberate--'I know that I don't make out my conception by my language' (Browning's own emphasis).

In Sordello (1863), Browning says:

'How I rose,
And how have you advanced! since evermore
Yourselves effect what I was fain before
Effect, what I supplied yourselves suggest,
What I leave bare yourselves can now invest.
How we attain to talk as brothers talk,
In half-words, call things by half-names, no balk
From discontinuing old aid. To-day
Takes in account the work of Yesterday.'
(V, 620-28)

This comes in a passage on the development of poetry. The growth of the poet is matched by a corresponding development in his audience. The poetry described here is very similar to Browning's own, and the crucial point is that what is left 'bare', spoken of in 'half-words' and 'half-names' by the poet, is completed by the reader. In other words, the synthesis of the poetry is something which the reader

effects. The reason for this is that Browning's poetry is concerned with 'Man's inmost life' (617), and hence he says, 'I cast external things away' (618).

'Leave the mere rude
 Explicit details! 'tis but brother's speech
 We need, speech where an accent's change gives each
 The other's soul--no speech to understand
 By former audience: need was then to expand,
 Expatiate--hardly were we brothers! true--
 Nor I lament my small remove from you,
 Nor reconstruct what stands already. Ends
 Accomplished turn to means: my art intends
 New structure from the ancient.'

(V, 634-43)

Browning rejects 'explicit details' (in The Ring and the Book he defines art as an 'oblique' communication), and stresses what is conveyed not so much by language itself as by tone, sound, and emphasis.

What is described is a form of poetry which goes beyond language, and hence which can communicate that which is inexpressible by language alone ('where an accent's change gives each / The other's soul'). But understanding depends on the reader, who is called the poet's 'brother' since the reader is active in the synthesis of the poem, he shares the poet's conception. In contrast to this, earlier poets left nothing to the reader's imagination. The reader received a direct narration and was in no way 'related' to the poet or his work ('hardly were we brothers!').

Browning then draws attention to what in Chapter Two I called the effacement of the poet--'Nor I lament my small remove from you'. The concluding lines quoted here comment upon Browning's reinterpretation of the epic genre. He says that he will not 'reconstruct what stands already' but that he intends to use the old forms and structures to make something new. 'My art intends / New structure from the ancient'.

With such an intention in mind it is hardly surprising that so much of Browning's poetry defies strict classification by the ancient structures.

What then are the salient points of Browning's reinterpretation of the epic genre, and how do they relate to the theme of this chapter--the boundaries of poetry and the subject-matter of reality? I have tried to make it clear that while Browning is an innovator, his poetic theory is part of what Arnold called the 'current of ideas' of the age. The interest in the 'private individual' rather than the exceptional hero, the interest in the discovery of beauty in common things rather than rare things, and the interest in 'the Hidden Soul' (Dallas), are all aspects of a Victorian reassessment of poetry. If in 1869 Forman recognized The Ring and the Book as the 'Epic of Psychology', it must be remembered that in January 1831 William James Fox recognized in Tennyson's Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830) a new movement in poetry, a movement based on the 'analysis of particular states of mind' (p. 214). The conclusion of Forman's article is anticipated by Fox's remark that the analysis of particular states of mind is 'as good a subject for poetical description as even the shield of Achilles itself' (p. 216), and that psychological insight 'is the essence of poetic power, and he who possesses it never need furbish up ancient armour' (p. 213).

Browning's epic must be seen as a Victorian achievement, and Browning's reinterpretation of the epic genre must be regarded as a reinterpretation which arose out of the current of ideas of the age. Having stressed Browning's relation to the poetical thought of the age, it is equally important to emphasize the point that Browning is an innovator who most consciously extends and explores the boundaries of his art. Browning's innovations are particularly marked in first, his emphasis on the relation of poetry to reality, and secondly, his

inclusion of analysis and discovery as legitimate activities for poetry. I shall explore these innovations more fully in this concluding half of the section.

II

Earlier in the thesis I pointed out that the lines from The Ring and the Book which head this section may involve a play with words. Browning's imaginary sceptical reader says: "'don't you deal in poetry, make-believe, / And the white lies it sounds like?'" Poetry is equated with 'make-believe'. 'Make-believe' 'sounds like' an escape into unreality, 'white lies', but Browning is dealing with another kind of 'make-believe'. Browning's poetry is not an indulgence in the white lies of make-believe, but an experience of the process of being made to believe. The sense of make-believe is changed from an escape into the realms of fancy, to a process of the acceptance of a truth. In this way Browning is the 'analyst, who turns in due course synthetist': the poem is both an experience of 'analysis and discovery' and of 'synthesis and exposition', or, as he says in Book One, 'the variance now, the eventual unity, / Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves' (1363-64). DeVane in his Handbook quite thoroughly assesses how far Browning has kept to his sources, and he agrees with Professor Hodell who wrote:

The names and characters, the dates, the events, the situations, and motives, the very turns of expression in the Poem, are continually drawn from the matters of fact in [The Old Yellow Book]. Browning's debt in these respects can scarcely be overstated. On the other hand the passion of the story, as Browning has conceived it, the spiritual meaning of the tragedy--all the real poetry--are created by the Poet. (p. 340)

The factual analysis and artistic synthesis are clear in this account of Browning's treatment of his subject.

The poem allows the reader to have a dual approach, as Browning says in the 'Essay on Shelley': the poet presents 'the fact itself,-- which . . . each of us receives for the first time as a creation, and is hereafter left to deal with, as . . . he best may' (p. 64). In this way the reader is made aware of the facts which inspired the poem, and also of the poem as the creation of the poet. But the matter which receives the most emphasis is the reader's own individual thought upon the fact received 'as a creation'. Browning makes the 'old woe' 'act itself o'er anew for men to judge' (I, 825). The Pope's judgment is 'the ultimate / Judgment save yours' (I, 1220-21), and Browning tells the readers to 'See it for yourselves' (I, 1364). By Book Twelve Browning believes he has succeeded as a 'Maker-see'; he confidently re-addresses the British Public as those 'who may like me yet'.

Subject and treatment are used to force the reader into an active creative role of seeing and experiencing, and of arranging and interpreting. The subject-matter is a trial and judgment. It is presented as a series of interpretations of the facts. At the same time the events of the case are a trial and test by God of the participants and of the institutions of society, and the whole is a trial and final judgment by the reader of the subject and treatment as a poem, and hence of the entire poetry and poetics of Browning. At every level the reader must participate and apply what he reads to himself and his own experience of life. In effect the truth which the reader comes to accept is something he has partly created for himself. Certainly by the final book, and our final judgment, it is clear that Browning's poem 'shall mean beyond the facts' (XII, 862).

A great deal of thought has been given by many Browning critics to the question of what exactly the truth of The Ring and the Book is, and whether this truth is different for each reader. In my investigation I shall concentrate on the relevance of these questions to Browning's poetic theory. I have already suggested that the poem is received by the reader in two ways: first, as a creation, with the poet's synthesis and exposition built into the very structure and material of the poem, and secondly, as a process of analysis and discovery in which the reader himself experiences the difficulties of achieving this synthesis, the difficulties of achieving truth. In my view, then, Browning is concerned with two main aspects of truth: truth as an absolute, a single complete entity, as it appears to God, and as the poet may make it appear to man; and truth as a commitment of belief, an action by man (cf. this idea to the letter quoted earlier: 'but there is no reward proposed for the feat of breathing, and a great one for that of believing--consequently there must go a great deal more of voluntary effort to this latter').

Browning is not concerned with a particular, narrowly localized truth. He is not intending to reveal to us, in Ranke's famous phrase, the historical truth of 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' (how it really was).⁹ We are not to learn everything about the events of the old Roman murder story. Browning admits that this is impossible, 'Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand, / What mortal ever in entirety saw?' (I, 828-29). Browning also makes it clear that we are not even to experience the whole matter as it appeared to those living at the time, we are to see it 'Not by the very sense and sight indeed' (my emphasis, I, 826). Neither is Browning's poem a presentation of the facts. Browning says that if the facts were all that mattered then the Old Yellow Book would be all this is required.

Was this truth of force?
 Able to take its own part as truth should,
 Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so--
 Yonder's a fire, into it goes my book,
 As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?
 (I, 372-76)

The point of this line of argument is to make it clear that Browning does not claim to present us with actual truth or historical truth. Browning is attempting to demonstrate the truth and value of art, and more particularly, of poetry.

I have already drawn attention to the phrase from the 'Essay on Shelley' in which Browning says that the poet presents 'the fact itself,--which with its infinite significances, each of us receives for the first time as a creation' (my emphasis). This is a good description of Browning's aim and method in The Ring and the Book and anticipates the central points of Browning's ring metaphor. Here I shall concentrate on the significance of the words 'as a creation'. It is only by receiving the facts in this way that their 'infinite significances', or truth, can be seen by the reader. In the ring metaphor 'gold' is not equated with 'fact'. Facts in themselves have no value unless they contain some element of a truth which is of meaning to mankind.

In The Two Poets of Croisic, Browning makes it plain that 'gold' means 'truth':

But truth, truth, that's the gold! and all the good
 I find in fancy is, it serves to set
 Gold's inmost glint free, gold which comes up rude
 And rayless from the mine.

(CLII)

In The Ring and the Book the book of the old Roman murder trial is described as 'rough ore'. The gold or truth which the poet sees in his

subject could easily be overlooked by those of poorer vision, it is 'rude and rayless'. The poet's aim is not merely to point out that there is gold there, but to shape and fashion the 'rough ore' so that 'gold's inmost glint' is set free and made clearly visible. The truth is seen by the poet in the original facts and the art of the poet consists of the communication of this vision to the reader.

The subject and its truth have not been invented: the artistry and the use of imagination or fancy (the alloy) come in the form and treatment of the subject to make it both meaningful and pleasing as a work of art. 'Gold as it was', 'No carat lost, and you have gained a ring' (I, 28, 30). The gold and the treatment it undergoes at the hands of the artificer together form the ring, and have become inseparable. The truth which we come to see is the truth of the poem as Browning created it: a fusion of fact and fancy. But Browning also writes:

So I wrought
This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,
And so, by one spirt, take away its trace
Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring.
(I, 1386-89)

and,

just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy^{unfastened} flies in fume;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains.
(I, 23-26)

Paul Cundiff in 'The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor' (1948), has argued convincingly that Browning understands that the goldsmith's acid only removes the alloy from the surface of the ring. Even without a precise knowledge of the goldsmith's technique, Browning makes it plain enough that his 'acid' only removes the 'trace' of the alloy; it

is only washed 'o'er [the] face' of the poem. The alloy of the poet's imagination remains so that 'self-sufficient now, the shape remains'.

This can be compared to the following lines:

This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,
The untempered gold, the fact untampered with,
The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made!
(I, 364-66)

and,

Was this truth of force?
Able to take its own part as truth should,
Sufficient, self-sustaining?
(I, 372-74)

Without the alloy of imagination the factual truth is not sufficient to be memorable or meaningful to mankind, anymore than the 'untempered gold' is sufficient in itself to make a work of art.

What the reader receives is not the factual truth, but an artistic creation from which the poet has removed the superficial traces of his art, leaving the alloy of fancy as an unobtrusive ingredient to shape and reveal the meaning and value of the raw material. The impression of the creation is as of real life: the reader is not so aware of the poet's control over his material as to allow him to withhold his own judgment and commitment. The power of seeing is awakened in him, rather than the poet's vision imposed upon him.

The blank verse and the series of dramatic monologues are of course artificial, conscious creations of the poet, but there is no obvious jingle of rhyme and, except in Books I and XII, no obvious guiding voice. The poetry works almost below the level of consciousness, increasing the vividness of character, heightening emotional effect and atmosphere, creating a web of imagery and allusion which gives depth and infinite

significance to facts which as facts may seem trivial. The series of monologues, in themselves fragments of the truth, become a process of discovery in which the reader seldom feels he is being led to Browning's vision of the truth, but to his own understanding of the truth.

Are we any closer to what Browning understands by poetic truth in The Ring and the Book? It is evident that Browning does not pretend to know what actually happened. Absolute truth is inaccessible to man and man's apprehension of truth is relative. In Sordello Browning asks whether,

each losel [keeps], through a maze of lies,
His own conceit of truth? to which he hies
By obscure windings, tortuous, if you will,
But to himself not inaccessible;
He sees truth, and his lies are for the crowd
Who cannot see; some fancied right allowed
His vilest wrong.

(III, 789-95)

Does this also apply to Guido? In his second monologue he says:

as God's my judge,
I see not where my fault lies, that's the truth!
(XI, 1447-48)

This could be taken as another of Guido's lies, but the context makes it clear that Guido thinks that his 'fault' is a practical one. He says 'practice makes man perfect',

Give again
The chance,--same marriage and no other wife,
Be sure I'll edify you!

(XI, 1457-59)

Although the reader and the Pope can see Guido's moral fault, there is no evidence in Guido's second monologue, where he reveals the truth about himself, that Guido sees this.

Browning does, as I shall show later, provide us with standards by which to judge Guido's guilt, but even so where the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy rests remains unclear. Guido says:

'I am one huge and sheer mistake,--whose fault?
Not mine at least, who did not make myself!'
(XI, 938-39)

Again this could be rejected as part of Guido's casuistry, but Pompilia excuses Guido on exactly those grounds--'So he was made; he nowise made himself' (VII, 1731). And the Pope says:

'The inward work and worth
Of any mind, what other mind may judge
Save God who only knows the thing He made.'
(X, 1669-71)

Two points emerge here: first, in reality man cannot know the absolute truth and cannot make an absolute judgment, secondly, man cannot achieve a true or absolute synthesis of life.

The ultimate meaning of the tragic events of the old Roman murder trial, its relation to some connected whole remains uncertain. Browning accepts the fact that God made Guido and in reality only God knows for what purpose in the scheme of life he was created. What Browning does is to use his imagination and his art to transcend these human limitations to achieve a truth which is absolute within the context of the poem and to reveal the eternal harmony and significance of 'primary lawyer pleadings' (I, 145) in a forgotten sordid murder trial.

If the truth is only true within the context of the poem in what way is the truth of poetry related to real life? Browning makes it evident that his poetry is based on 'prose-experience' or factual reality. For example, the process of Browning's poetic creation is

tersely described in the opening lines of the 'Parleying with Charles Avison':

first of all, the little fact
Which led my fancy forth.

Also Browning insists that his fancy or imagination is only used to make others see his vision of truth (see the quotation from The Two Poets of Croisic, p. 385). In The Ring and the Book he suggests that fancy used in this way is also a fact, an element of the truth. 'Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?' (I, 705). The answer has already been given: 'Fancy with fact is just one fact the more' (I, 464). The fiction which is used to achieve a communication of truth is a fact of that communication, a part of the truth communicated.

It is only by imaginatively re-creating the events of The Old Yellow Book so that the reader can experience the discovery and analysis of truth for himself that Browning can communicate his truth. Browning's truth cannot be communicated directly; it cannot be imposed upon someone from without since its acceptance depends on a personal commitment of belief. This is why Browning regards the best poets as the 'Makers-see' --the emphasis is on the process of making the reader see. I shall discuss the importance of this process in more detail later.

In 'A Pillar at Sebzevar' (Ferishtah's Fancies, 1884), Browning writes:

If out of sand comes sand and nought but sand
Affect not to be quaffing at mirage,
Nor nickname pain as pleasure. That, belike,
Constitutes just the trial of thy wit
And worthiness to gain promotion,--hence,
Proves the true purpose of thine actual life,
Thy soul's environment of things perceived,
Things visible and things invisible,
Fact, fancy--all was purposed to evolve

This and this only--was thy wit of worth
 To recognize the drop's use, love the same,
 And loyally declare against mirage
 Though all the world asseverated dust
 Was good to drink?

(117-30)

This 'trial of . . . wit' in judging what is true, right and wrong, good and bad, is the main theme of The Ring and the Book. Reality is 'thy soul's environment of things perceived, / Things visible and things invisible, / Fact, fancy'. Browning seems to say that 'things visible' equals 'fact', and 'things invisible' equals 'fancy'. Yet both make up 'thy soul's environment' and both are equally real. The point would seem to be that 'things invisible' can only be apprehended by the fancy or imagination. In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country Browning says:

He thought . . .

(Suppose I should prefer 'He said'?)
 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.
 (3276-82)¹⁰

What is visible then, the act and its results, is only the tip of an iceberg. To judge our 'soul's environment' we must also understand motive and intention, 'the thoughts which give the act significance'. This is the issue of The Ring and the Book since the facts of the visible actions are 'proved and incontestable' (X, 1965). The whole judgment is concerned with the motives behind the actions.

In The Ring and the Book the Pope makes his judgment without fear because his motives are pure:

Therefore I stand on my integrity,
 Nor fear at all: and if I hesitate
 It is because I need to breathe awhile,
 Rest, as the human right allows, review
 Intent the little seeds of act, the tree,--
 The thought, to clothe in deed, I give the world.
 (X, 275-80)

Browning and the Pope have often been identified, and it has been argued that there is little to suggest dramatic distancing, but in fact there is a significant distinction between Browning and his character. The quotation given comes just after the Pope confesses that 'I changed a chaplain once, / For no cause . . . / Save that he snuffled somewhat saying mass' (X, 268-70). He goes on to say, 'For I am ware it is the seed of act, / God holds appraising in His hollow palm' (X, 271-72). The view expressed here is that God judges by motives or intentions, and that these are known only to the individual concerned and to God. On those terms the Pope cannot possibly know whether Guido is guilty or innocent, and this is the whole point of his argument--he does not know absolutely, but at least his own motives are pure.

Browning, however, as a poet does know--'Who is a poet needs must apprehend / Alike both speech and thoughts'. The poet mimics God's knowledge: in Paracelsus 'God is the perfect poet' (II, 648). It is not true, as Robert Langbaum argued, that 'what we arrive at in the end is not the truth, but truth as the worthiest characters of the poem see it' (Poetry of Experience, p. 122). In Book One Browning provides us with the absolute truth; the rest of the poem is devoted to making Browning's truth a truth which is experienced, and hence shared, by the reader.

Perception of the truth must involve insight into 'things invisible' or 'fact unseen' ('De Lairese', 152). The value of art is exactly its

capacity to go beyond a mere imitation of the appearance of reality. Ruskin attempted to distinguish between the imitation of reality and the perception of truth:

Imitation can only be of something material, but truth has reference to statements both of the qualities of material things, and of emotions, impressions, and thoughts. There is a moral as well as material truth, --a truth of impression as well as of form,--of thought as well as of matter; and the truth of impression and thought is a thousand times the more important of the two. Hence, truth is a term of universal application, but imitation is limited to that narrow field of art which takes cognizance only of material things.

Secondly,--Truth may be stated by any signs or symbols which have a definite signification in the minds of those to whom they are addressed, although such signs be themselves no image nor likeness of anything. . . . Ideas of imitation, of course, require the likeness of the object. They speak to the perceptive faculties only: truth to the conceptive.

(Modern Painters I, Pt i, Sec I, Ch 5, § 1-3,
Works III, 104-05)

This is very much in tune with what Browning says in The Ring and the Book.

Well, now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world
Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
(I, 698-700)

Browning's fancy or poetic insight only 'seems untrue' if one limits truth to what Ruskin calls 'material truth'. Browning uses fancy to produce 'live truth', a truth beyond the mere factual bones which remain and which are only part of the truth. His truth is clearly a truth of 'emotions, impressions, and thoughts'; a truth which appeals 'to the conceptive' faculties.

Ruskin also anticipates Browning's use of the St George / Perseus myth: 'Truth may be stated by any signs or symbols which have a definite

signification in the minds of those to whom they are addressed'.

Browning's subject is carefully stressed as being based on fact, while the presentation is equally carefully stressed as being the work of the poetic imagination: 'Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse? / Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?' (I, 696-97). Browning presents the facts of the case and also his conception of those facts; he presents 'a truth of impression as well as of form'. The truth of the subject only takes on a 'universal application' when the poet has 'fused [his] live soul and that inert stuff' (I, 469).¹¹

Browning, as a poet, 'repeats God's process in man's due degree / Attaining man's proportionate result' (I, 717-18). 'For such man's feat is, in the due degree, / --Mimic creation, galvanism for life' (I, 739-40). In Book One Browning offers us the absolute truth, but, as I said, it is absolute and true only within the context of the poem, 'in man's due degree' as 'mimic creation'. At this point, however, his directly expressed synthesis and exposition of the 'truth' is regarded by the reader as subjective human opinion. At the conclusion of the poem, Browning addresses the British Public and delivers

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
(XII, 834-36)

The emphasis falls on the limitations of human judgment and human communication (i.e. language). Man's perception of truth and his ability to communicate truth are flawed. In Book One Browning says he will make the 'old woe' 'act itself o'er anew for men to judge' (825). Browning mimics life in order to provide a controlled experience by which the reader himself comes to share Browning's truth. He makes it

very clear that his poem is not a direct exposition of what he regards as the truth: 'human speech' and 'human testimony' are specifically rejected as the means of 'speaking truth' in art.

The ideas expressed in the conclusion to The Ring and the Book are very close to those expressed in 'Transcendentalism: a Poem in Twelve Books' (the number of books suggests that 'Transcendentalism' is intended to be an epic). In this poem the poet is chided for speaking 'naked thoughts' 'instead of draping them in sights and sounds' (4). John of Halberstadt is praised for creating the actual thing or experience instead of just speaking his thoughts: 'John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about' (38). By doing 'the thing' (Ring and the Book XII, 856), the truth and synthesis of the poem are made real and alive by the mind of the receiver: the facts of the Old Yellow Book are no longer isolated and meaningless, dead issues of the past, detached from the reader's own existence: through the commitment of the reader's own judgment they have become a living part of his own thought and experience.

Unlike conventional epics, The Ring and the Book concentrates as much on the means of expression as on what is expressed. The process of analysis and discovery, which is normally regarded as a preliminary stage of poetic creation omitted from the creation itself, is made the dominant pleasure and experience of the poem, and it is from this process that the reader finally achieves a poetic synthesis. The importance of the means of expression partly explains why Browning presents the reader with a series of monologues: the poet's conception, his poetic vision, is to be shared by the reader.

Browning suggests that his imagination allows him to have a god-like vision:

Yet heaven my fancy lifts to, ladder-like,--
 As Jack reached, holpen of his beanstalk-rungs!
 (I, 1346-47)

He goes on to discuss how he could impart his vision:

A novel country: I might make it mine
 By choosing which one aspect of the year
 Suited mood best, and putting solely that
 On panel somewhere in the House of Fame,
 Landscaping what I saved, not what I saw.
 (I, 1348-52)

Browning could present just 'one aspect' of the world he sees. He could present 'the land dwarfed to one likeness of the land, / Life cramped corpse-fashion' (I, 1359-60), but instead he says:

Rather learn and love
 Each facet-flash of the revolving year!--
 Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
 The variance now, the eventual unity,
 Which makes the miracle. See it for yourselves,
 This man's act, changeable because alive!
 (I, 1360-65)

A single monologue could present just one aspect of the events. Also a single monologue, with its single point of view, would suggest 'landscaping', that is, selection and direction by the poet. The word 'landscaping' implies artificiality, and Browning suggests that such landscaping, 'choosing . . . one aspect', would be untrue to his full poetic vision, 'not what I saw'. The value and pleasure of the poem, 'learn and love', consists of the reader's experience of all the different facets of truth, of the 'variance'.

Again it is important to see that Browning is offering artistic truth: our god-like vision is achieved by the poet's fancy, 'heaven my fancy lifts to', and we cannot see 'each facet-flash', every single view of everyone who knew anything about the truth, but only representative

views which together create 'the eventual unity', a vision of the absolute truth. The essential innovation of The Ring and the Book is that Browning emphasizes not the subject-matter of epic, but the experience of epic.

The problems of judgment and the complexity of truth work on so many levels that the poem acquires an encyclopaedic and epic quality. Although the subject seems narrow, a Roman murder story, and is meticulously set in a specific period and place, Browning constantly blurs the divisions between seventeenth-century Rome and Victorian Britain, between fiction and fact.¹² He demonstrates the irrelevance of arguments about whether poetry should deal with contemporary matters or with timeless classical subjects, and focuses our attention on the universal and eternal search for truth and on the problems of judging what the truth is. How do we judge, by what standards? How impartial is our judgment? How far do we see only what we want to see or expect to see? These questions are explored by and through the characters in the poem, and our understanding of the questions deepens as we progress through the monologues.

It is relatively easy, for example, to see where Half-Rome's bias lies and why, and it is also relatively easy to see where and why Other Half-Rome is prejudiced, but in this case Browning adds the complication that while the judgment is correct the reasons for making this judgment are incorrect:

Next, from Rome's other half, the opposite feel
For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess,--
Or if success, by no skill but mere luck
This time, through siding rather with the wife,
Because a fancy-fit inclined that way.

(I, 883-87)

The full complexity of the questions is experienced in Guido's second monologue: the climax of the poem.

Browning begins the conclusion of his poem by speaking of 'our glaring Guido',

you have seen his act,
By my power--may-be, judged it by your own.
(XII, 9-10)

Browning makes it clear that Guido's act is the central subject of the poem, and that our judgment of that act is the central experience of the poem. L.J. Swingle in 'Truth and The Ring and the Book: a negative view' argues that,

if it is true that the Pope seems to 'speak finally on the matter', then what do we do with the last two monologues? There are various answers that one can pose here, of course. With Guido's second monologue, Browning lets us encounter experiential verification of the Pope's judgments: Browning 'rounds out' his epic in the final monologues--these and other answers come to mind. But none of the answers, I think, are quite satisfactory; and one is left with the fact that the poem seems to have a rather long anticlimax, once the 'truth' has come to light. (p. 263)

Swingle argues that truth and the search for truth are not the main concerns of the poem, and that if they were then the monologues after the Pope's judgment are anticlimactic. I have suggested that the main concern of the poem is the reader's experience of the search for truth, and I have also suggested that Guido's second monologue, and not the Pope's, should be seen as the climax of the poem.

In Book One the Pope's is 'the ultimate / Judgment save yours', and in Book Twelve the reader is said to have 'judged it by [his] own' power. The Pope's judgment is clearly not the final verdict and he does not 'speak finally on the matter'. Moreover the absolute truth

is given by Browning in Book One, as indeed is the Pope's decision. The reader does not have to wait until Book Ten for 'the "truth" to come to light'. Also if Guido's monologue were simply 'experiential verification of the Pope's judgments' then the progression of the poem is halted since the sole purpose of the eleventh monologue is to verify the tenth.

In my view the sequence of monologues is a progressive experience towards an understanding of our basis for judgment, and of our acceptance of Browning's truth (the whole purpose of Browning's poem is lost if Guido's monologue is used merely to prove the accuracy of the Pope's judgment). The purpose of the Pope's monologue is to suggest to the reader how to judge and in the sequence of monologues this is essential. Philip Drew in 'A Note on the Lawyers' writes:

the response to be expected of a careful reader who has reached the end of Book IX is despair. In the course of the earlier books he has developed sympathies, and finally, with infinite pains, arrived at his own view of the truth. Now he is confronted by two men to whom truth as such is meaningless, whose only interest is in the sort of case they can present.
(my emphasis, p. 304)

This interpretation supports my view that the monologues provide a progressive personal experience for the reader. He goes on to say, 'we reject [the lawyers'] speeches not . . . because of their "personal inadequacies" but because we know better' (p. 306).

Outside the context of the poem, the two lawyers are entertaining, almost Dickensian, characters, who should delight the reader, but because we have 'with infinite pains, arrived at [our] own view of the truth' the lawyers are generally regarded with hostility and frustration. It is the lawyers 'to whom truth as such is meaningless' who make us

feel the importance of truth, and who make us realize that we do now hold a personal view of the truth. We have, then, made our judgment (or come to accept Browning's judgment) before the Pope's monologue, but the basis of this judgment is unclear and untested. The Pope's monologue provides us with a basis for our judgment, and Guido's monologue tests this basis.

Guido's second monologue demonstrates unquestionably that Guido is guilty, but it also demonstrates the necessity of understanding in what way he is guilty and on what basis we are to judge his guilt. The whole movement of the poem has been towards the establishment of the reader's personal conviction of the truth. In Book XI we see that Guido's 'truth' is based on all the 'visible' facts of life--facts of observation, of reason, of utility, of appearance and convention. It is a truth which is opposed to any real personal conviction or belief. If one compares Guido's truth with the quotations given earlier from Browning's letter to E.B.B., one can see that Guido completely fails God's 'probation'. His 'will and intellect' are never used to determine where his duty to God lies, and this Browning regards as the 'one law, however modified, for the greater and less'.¹³

Guido is the cynical rational man and his knowledge is that of the world; it is an 'external' knowledge based on his observations of what brings worldly success. His second monologue consists largely of justifications on the theme of he did only what the world had taught him. Examples are numerous--'But you as good as bade me wear sheep's wool / Over wolf's skin' (XI, 824-25); 'All honest Rome approved my part; / Whoever owned wife, sister, daughter,--nay, / Mistress' (XI, 39-41). He argues that he only played 'some prank my grandsire played' (XI, 111), and that he should have been warned 'that the law o' the game

is changed' (XI, 116).

He argues convincingly that the only reality and beliefs which people truly hold are those of the visible physical world. Faith, he says, is soon abandoned when calamities strike:

Who holds to faith whenever rain begins?
 What does the father when his son lies dead,
 The merchant when his money-bags take wing,
 The politician whom a rival ousts?
 No case but has its conduct, faith prescribes:
 Where's the obedience that shall edify?
 Why, they laugh frankly in the face of faith
 And take the natural course,--this rends his hair
 Because his child is taken to God's breast,
 That gnashes teeth and raves at loss of trash
 Which rust corrupts and thieves break through and steal,
 And this, enabled to inherit earth
 Through meekness, curses till your blood runs cold!
 (XI, 744-56)

Guido appeals to reason, logic, fact, and he constantly affects the tone of someone who says what everyone thinks--'Contort your brows! You know I speak the truth' (XI, 695), 'Don't think to put on the professional face! / You know what I know: casuists as you are, / Each nerve must creep, each hair start, sting and stand, / At such illogical inconsequence!' (XI, 383-86). His materialistic arguments are not easily discounted.

The Pope himself considers the power of the world's influence on the way we look at things and make our judgments. 'There's a new tribunal now / Higher than God's--the educated man's!' (X, 1975-76), and who is 'hypocrite, / To-day, perchance to-morrow recognized / The rational man, the type of common sense' (X, 1938-40). The Pope has also been advised to consider the prestige of the church, "'Since he may plead a priest's immunity'" (X, 2001), "'a son's privilege at stake'" (X, 2011); or, "'the spirit of culture speaks, / Civilisation is

imperative" (X, 2016-17); and he must consider the social issue, "Supremacy of husband over wife!" (X, 2034). There are a host of logical worldly reasons for finding Guido innocent, but the Pope believes that Guido is guilty. It is not enough to judge or act on the opinion of others, even if such embodies the rulings of law, religion, society or culture. If the Pope had judged according to such opinion he would have been no different from Guido, acting solely on the knowledge of the visible world and ignoring 'things invisible', the motive or intention which 'is the seed of the act, / God holds appraising in His hollow palm' (X, 271-72).

The Pope emphasizes the division between human and divine law and judgment. Human law he calls 'the instinct of the world'.

At last we have the instinct of the world
 Ruling its household without tutelage,
 And while the two laws, human and divine,
 Have busied finger with this tangled case,
 In the brisk junior pushes, cuts the knot,
 Pronounces for acquital.

(X, 1991-96)

The instinct of the world is not to search out, judge, and act, according to the truth, but rather to act as Guido acts in the spirit of self-interest. The Pope's judgment is 'the true instinct of an old good man' (XII, 593). The Pope's is the 'true instinct' because it is the instinct to do what he knows is right and true, and not simply to do what will give him the most pleasure or bring him the most gain. The Pope ignores this human law:

'Who is upon the Lord's side?' asked the Count.
 I who write--

'On receipt of this command,
 Acquaint Count Guido and his fellows four
 They die to-morrow.'

(X, 2100-04)

By making his judgment in answer to a question originally asked by Guido, the Pope emphasizes why he finds Guido guilty: Guido fully appreciated the ultimate issue at stake in making his choice. In the letter to E.B.B., Browning makes it clear that he believes that our decisions and conduct reveal our true religion and beliefs--'for all our life is some form of religion, and all our action some belief'. Guido chooses to deny man's moral and spiritual nature and calls himself 'a primitive religionist' (XI, 1917). He says 'I think I never was at any time / A Christian' (XI, 1914-15).

The section on Euripides in the Pope's monologue makes it plain that Guido is not condemned for denying Christianity, but for denying man's higher nature. For Euripides, born before Christ's birth,

'salvation was impossible.
Each impulse to achieve the good and fair,
Each aspiration to the pure and true,
Being without a warrant or an aim,
Was . . . sterile.'
(X, 1688-92)

He goes on:

'I, born to perish like the brutes, or worse,
Why not live brutishly, obey my law?'
(X, 1701-02)¹⁴

But Euripides chooses to adopt 'virtue as my rule of life, / Waived all reward, loved but for loving's sake' (X, 1710-11). The Pope condemns Guido for choosing to follow his lowest instincts:

For I find this black mark impinge the man,
That he believes in just the vile of life.
Low instinct, base pretension, are these truth?
(X, 510-12)

Browning makes the personal choice the whole essence and test of a

man's life. In 'A Pillar at Sebzevar', 'the true purpose of thine actual life' is,

This and this only--was thy wit of worth
 To recognize the drop's use, love the same,
Though all the world asseverated dust
Was good to drink?

(my emphasis)

Euripides is crucial to the Pope's judgment (and to our judgment) because he demonstrates the importance of the personal decision, the individual's moral choice, regardless of the opinion or general condition of the rest of the world.

Guido's argument exactly opposes Euripides' view; again and again he shows that he follows what the Pope calls 'the instinct of the world'. Guido's 'creed's one article-- / [Is] "Get pleasure, 'scape pain"' (XI, 767-68). The truth is irrelevant to him, if a lie will 'get pleasure, 'scape pain' then it is as good as the truth. Of Pompilia he says:

Can she feel no love? Let her show the more,
 Sham the worse.

(XI, 1406-07)

and of religion,

'And,--inasmuch as faith gains most,--feign faith!'

(XI, 772)

In Book One Browning sets the standard: 'There's nothing in nor out o' the world / Good except truth' (I, 698-99). It is on this basis that Guido is judged--he deliberately chooses to ignore the truth to satisfy his own inclinations. The Pope allows that God created Guido, and made greed part of his nature (X, 413-22), but argues that this was to make Guido's 'probation' fair:

Wherein I see a trial fair and fit
 For one else too unfairly fenced about,
 Set above sin, beyond his fellows here,
 Guarded from the arch-tempter, all must fight,
 By a great birth, traditional name,
 Diligent culture, choice companionship,
 Above all, conversancy with the faith
 Which puts forth for its base of doctrine just
 'Man is born nowise to content himself
 But please God.' He accepted such a rule.
 (X, 426-35)

The Pope's judgment is based on the fact that Guido was given 'the wit to seek, / Wisdom to choose' (X, 403-04), but that 'Not one permissible impulse moves the man' (X, 536) and Guido chooses to follow his basest impulse.

The central point of the necessity of the individual to strive after truth, and to act on this personal belief of what the truth is, is made clear by the monologues which precede the Pope's. The Pope's monologue clarifies and expands the basis of judgment; it does not by itself establish a basis or impose a judgment. His review of the characters and their actions helps the reader to grasp and co-ordinate the main issues behind the earlier monologues so that the reader begins to form a poetic synthesis. For example, the Pope reviews the complex question of whether one can know for certain that one's intuitive grasp of the truth is founded on a true instinct, yet at the same time it is clear that Browning also expects the reader to add his own experience of the earlier monologues to this review. The problem of 'The instinctive theorizing whence a fact / Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look' (I, 863-64), was introduced to us in Books Two and Three, but it is also central to our judgment of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, Guido, and the Pope himself (and indeed also of the Poet's own vision of truth).

The Pope draws together the central themes of the poem. His

assessment of Pompilia sharpens our vision of the significance of her actions on this question of following instinct. The Pope says of Pompilia:

This I praise most in thee, where all I praise,
 That having been obedient to the end
 According to the light allotted, law
 Prescribed thy life, still tried, still standing test,--
 Dutiful to the foolish parents first,
 Submissive next to the bad husband,--nay,
 Tolerant of those meaner miserable
 That did his hests, eked out the dole of pain,--
 Thou, patient thus, couldst rise from law to law,
 The old to the new, promoted at one cry
 O' the trump of God to the new service, not
 To longer bear, but henceforth fight.

(X, 1047-58)

Pompilia does not simply act on impulse, from her monologue we know that she sought guidance from parents, husband, Archbishop and Governor. But these authorities fail the test of just judgment and truth, and the Pope's highest commendation of Pompilia is that she was 'obedient to the end / According to light allotted', she was 'obedient' to her understanding of truth rather than to the worldly authorities which she knew did not uphold truth. He goes on:

Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
 And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,¹⁵
 Accept the obligation laid on thee,
 Mother elect, to save the unborn child,
 As brute and bird do.

(X, 1072-76)

Browning's concept of 'true instinct' (XII, 593) is really what he regards as God's direction of Life, 'defend the trust of trusts, / Life from the Ever Living' (X, 1079-80). What the Pope calls the prompting of Nature in Pompilia is an instinct to preserve and protect life, beyond all thought of self: it is a nature and instinct from outside

the self, operating as part of the great plan of life. Guido's many appeals to nature and instinct reveal that he regards these as 'natural caprice' (XI, 1437), mere selfish impulse--'Say that I hated her for no one cause / Beyond my pleasure so to do' (XI, 1432-33). For Pompilia instinct represents God's prompting, a call to obey his truth; Guido perverts this into something which means a prompting to follow his own selfish pleasures.

The Pope's assessment of Pompilia also draws attention to a major theme of her monologue: the gap between what should be and what is, the gap between the truth in essence and the truth in name or appearance. Her parents turn out to be 'No more my relatives than you or you' (VII, 148). 'Everyone says that husbands love their wives', 'Tis duty, law, pleasure, religion: well, / You see how much of this comes true in mine!' (VII, 152, 154-55). She is told that the Archbishop 'stands for God' (VII, 748), but finds 'proof the Archbishop was just man, / And hardly that' (VII, 848-49). The Pope's view of such authorities and institutions helps to confirm our own judgment of the authorities which Pompilia rejected. Moreover, because his view is more detached and abstract our understanding of the issues involved is enlarged and given a more universal perspective. An institution or authority is,

A thing existent only while it acts,
Does as designed, else a nonentity,
For what is an idea unrealized?--
(X, 1500-02)

Pompilia's decision to ignore the guidance of established authority is thus not merely impulsive, but based on her perception of the failure of authority to uphold the idea for which it claims to exist.

In his assessment of Caponsacchi the Pope again concentrates our

attention on the theme of truth in essence and truth in appearance. Caponsacchi, 'in mask and motley' (X, 1167), does what 'the men-at-arms with cross on coat' (X, 1165) should have done but completely failed to do. It is Caponsacchi who proves, when tested, to be God's champion (X, 1155-56). Like Pompilia, Caponsacchi seems to be the epitome of instinctive action, and the Pope seems to sanction such action: 'Let him rush straight, and how shall he go wrong?' (X, 1564). But, as with Pompilia, there are qualifications. First, in the context of the passage, Caponsacchi's seemingly thoughtless blind action is blind only in a very special sense. He is

All blindness, bravery and obedience!---blind?
 Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,
 Delirious with the plenitude of light.
 (my emphasis, X, 1560-62)

Like Pompilia, Caponsacchi does not act on blind impulse, but in blind obedience to the truth (cf. X, 1048).

If the reader thinks back to Caponsacchi's monologue, a further resemblance to Pompilia becomes clear: Caponsacchi does not act immediately on instinct, but first attempts to let conventional authority put the wrong to rights. He is reluctant to go beyond the established bounds of his priestly duties:

'I am a priest.
 Duty to God is duty to her: I think
 God, who created her, will save her too
 Some new way, by one miracle the more,¹⁶
 Without me.'

(VI, 1029-33)

But his 'duty to God' overrules all conventions as to what a priest is and should be, and again the Pope clarifies this point and widens the significance of Caponsacchi's decision:

Be glad thou hast let light into the world.
 Through that irregular breach o' the boundary.
 (X, 1204-05)

Again what seems a blind instinctive grasp of truth is in some ways a return to first principles.

The Pope sees Caponsacchi as 'Learning anew the use of soldiership' (my emphasis, X, 1207). Caponsacchi's priesthood was 'an idea unrealized', his action realizes the original idea. There is clearly a distinction between the instinctive grasp of truth of Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope and 'the instinctive theorizing whence a fact / Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look' (my emphasis). This instinct is like Guido's in that it has nothing to do with truth but everything to do with pleasing one's self. Also although Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope know the truth instinctively, their decision to act on this truth is not taken lightly or easily: invariably their decision involves the opposite of personal pleasure. The Pope's parting imaginary address to Caponsacchi is 'Work, be unhappy but bear life, my son!' (X, 1211).

For the Pope 'life's business' is 'the terrible choice': the purpose of man's life is to choose to uphold the truth at all costs. To live life is to strive after truth, to strive to do one's duty to God. For Guido life is a game, a pretence, it is not lived but acted. Church, law, morality, and social values are regarded not from the point of view of what they stand for, their actual idea or meaning, but purely as facades to hide behind or to use for selfish ends. If murder is no longer socially or legally acceptable then 'Apprise me that the law o' the game is changed' (XI, 116). When Pompilia learns of her parents' deception and becomes passively submissive, she is seen by Guido as playing a game in as vile a manner as himself:

What of her husband's relish or dislike
 For this new game of giving up the game,
 This worst offence of not offending more?
 (XI, 1340-42)

In Guido, Browning creates a superb exponent of the 'things visible' view of life, and yet at the same time he also shows why we cannot ignore 'things invisible'. Words, institutions, religion, law--all are meaningless if they are true only in appearance and not in the reality. The Pope sees the weakness of religion in his age as due to,

Faith in the thing, grown faith in the report--
 Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
 Through increased faith in thing reports belie?
 (X, 1865-67)

A return to the source is advocated, a return to the actual meaning behind the facade of reports and codes, a continual re-examination of the values and meanings of human life.¹⁷

The reader's judgment extends to the poem itself as poetry. If we sanction Caponsacchi's 'irregular breach o' the boundary' to 'let light into the world', must we not also sanction Browning's breach of the conventional boundaries of poetry in order to deal with truth and reality rather than 'make-believe'? If we accept that it is essential constantly to review conventions and rules to make sure that they are still relevant to life, and serving the purpose for which they were devised, then surely we must also apply this to the conventions and rules of poetry? An institution or convention is 'a thing existent only while it acts, / Does as designed, else a nonentity'. The idea in the poem of cycles of fresh strong faith and stale weak faith recalls the cycles of poetry in the 'Essay on Shelley' where Browning stresses the constant necessity to return to the source of poetry--'this world'. The related

idea of 'Faith in the thing, grown faith in the report' echoes the important passage in the essay on the 'tribe of successors' who work on in the tradition of a great poet till 'the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality . . . on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral'.

John Morley in his review of The Ring and the Book argues that people have come to expect poetry to confine itself to those areas and aspects of life which have come to be regarded as acceptably poetic, rather than to seek poetry in, or create poetry from, reality itself. He writes:

The truth is, we have this long while been so debilitated by pastorals, by graceful presentations of the Arthurian legend for drawing-rooms, by idylls, not robust and Theocritean, but such little pictures as might adorn a ladies' school, by verse directly didactic, that a rude inburst of air from the outside welter of human realities is apt to spread a shock, which might show in what a simpleton's paradise we have been living. (p. 331)

To the question asked earlier, of how are we to judge Browning's poems if he goes beyond traditional interpretations of poetry, the answer now seems clearer. With The Ring and the Book Browning reverses 'faith in the thing, grown faith in the report' by creating a poem which asks the reader to judge whether the poem is an epic by the experience of the thing itself, and not by the now stale rules and conventions of what an epic poem should be. At the same time, he does not ask the reader to accept his 'report' of what poetry is--'Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought' (my emphasis, 855-56). Browning's poetry, then, is not to be judged by preconceived ideas of what poetry should be, nor even by Browning's own poetics, but by the pleasure and satisfaction of the reader's experience of the poetry.

The conclusion of The Ring and the Book emphasizes the great innovation of the poem: it is not a synthesis and exposition by the poet, but a process of analysis and discovery by the reader, leading to a synthesis which has been jointly created by poet and reader. The important concluding lines of the poem, lines 855-63, have been often quoted, but their exact meaning has seldom been examined. 'Do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word' obviously indicates that the poem is designed not to tell the poet's truth directly, but to allow the reader to come to perceive the truth for himself. But a more precise meaning of these lines may be seen if we link them to the Pope's words:

Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these--
 Not absolutely in a portion, yet
 Evolvable from the whole: evolved at last
 Painfully, held tenaciously by me.
 (X, 228-31)

The monologues in themselves do not hold the truth, but they 'do the thing' which allows the reader to evolve the truth 'from the whole'.

The 'thought', or the poet's conception, is conveyed indirectly by a process which is not in itself the poet's vision, but is the means by which the reader himself comes to this vision. Browning also suggests that his poem conveys two truths:

So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall,--
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than ever the Andante dived,--
 So write a book shall mean beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.
 (XII, 858-63)

The artist's depiction of his subject, that is, the subject itself as the reader sees it, is one truth, but the artist also suggests a truth

beyond the subject. This deeper or higher truth is elicited from the reader's mind by the way in which the artist expresses the subject, and not by the subject itself. The painter reveals a truth 'beyond mere imagery on the wall', Browning's poem means 'beyond the facts'. That the greatness of a poem lies not in its subject-matter but in the poet's conception and treatment of that subject-matter is a point which Browning made a major issue in The Ring and the Book.

Browning's poetry was frequently criticized for its unusual subjects, and, as Carlyle observed, The Ring and the Book has a subject which seems only to want forgetting. In 1869, John Morley observed that 'when the first volume of Mr Browning's new poem came before the critical tribunals . . . there was much lamentation . . . over the poet's choice of a subject. With facile largeness of censure, it was pronounced a murky subject, sordid, unlovely, morally sterile, an ugly leaf out of some seventeenth-century Italian Newgate Calendar'. Morley goes on to make the point which Browning's poem so clearly demonstrates,

that the poet must be trusted to judge of the capacity of his own theme, and that it is his conception and treatment of it which ultimately justify or discredit his choice. (p. 331)

This strikes at the heart of the whole subject-matter debate, and indeed goes even further to challenge the entire idea of poetics or of any set of rules to govern art.

In the criticism which followed The Ring and the Book one can discern in some of the reviews an important division between those critics who believe that Browning extended the boundaries of poetry, or revised our understanding of what poetry is, and those critics who feel that Browning did not really create poetry at all. I have already

referred to John Morley, H.B. Forman, Alfred Austin, and Henry James. I shall now briefly widen out the significance of their reactions to Browning's epic, and to his poetry in general. Broadly speaking, it is possible to divide these critics into pairs: Morley and Forman regard Browning as an innovator, and poetry as an art-form capable of constant renewal or change; Austin and James see Browning as a 'hybrid', as someone who does not really produce poetry at all, and both men hold to a conception of poetry which is based on convention and tradition. The reviews of Morley and Forman, referred to in this section, are characterized by a willingness to recognize and examine Browning's originality; the reviews of Austin and James clearly indicate that the authors come to Browning's poems with preconceived ideas about what they expect poetry to be.

There are strong similarities between the reviews of Austin and James--for Austin, Browning is like an 'anatomical professor', 'a mere analyst' ('The Poetry of the Period', p. 324); James feels that 'he deals with human character as a chemist' ('Browning's Inn Album', p. 50); Austin writes that if Browning wrote 'explicitly and clearly--though still in verse, [the] prose nature [of his thought] would be seen at a glance by everybody' (p. 325); James finds The Inn Album 'only barely comprehensible', 'we are reading neither prose nor poetry' (p. 50); Austin denies that Browning ever achieves a true synthesis in his poems (p. 324); James finds a 'want of clearness of explanation, of continuity, of at least superficial verisimilitude, of the smooth, the easy, the agreeable' (p. 50). The centre to this criticism is an objection to what I called the 'unsolved' quality of Browning's poetry. Both Austin and James expect the poet and his poetry to be detached from life. Poetry should not deal with immediate reality, with the multitudinousness

of life unshaped by the critical power (as Arnold would say), nor should it intrude upon the actual existence of the reader by requiring him to share in the work of creating a poetic synthesis.

Like Austin, James perceives the main innovations of Browning's epic but fails to see their significance. In 'The Novel in The Ring and the Book' he writes:

We can only take it as tremendously interesting, interesting not only in itself, but with the great added interest, the dignity and authority and beauty, of Browning's general perception of it. We can't not accept this, and little enough, on the whole, do we want not to. . . . Yet all the while we are in the presence, not at all of an achieved form, but of a mere preparation for one, though on the hugest scale. . . . He works over his vast material and we then work him over, though not availing ourselves, to this end, of a grain he himself doesn't somehow give us.
(pp. 73-74)

This is exactly the process of analysis and discovery, leading to a synthesis, which I described in this section, and it is a neat prose account of Browning's own explanation of his intention in the poem-- I, 824-37, and I, 1348-89.

Another quotation from this review by James is even more enlightening:

We feel ourselves . . . in the world of Expression at any cost. That, essentially, is the world of poetry. . . . Browning is 'upon' us, straighter upon us always, somehow, than anyone else of his race. . . . as if he came up against us, each time, on the same side of the street and not on the other side, across the way, where we mostly see the poets elegantly walk, and where we greet them without danger of concussion. It is on this side, as I call it, on our side, on the other hand, that I rather see our encounter with the novelists taking place. (p. 78)

Earlier I quoted a passage from Sordello in which Browning explains that the development of man and of poetry allow him to use 'half-words', and

to 'leave the mere rude / Explicit details'. The poet and his audience are 'brothers'; there is no distance between them. Communication is a shared action completed between them,--'yourselves effect what I was fain before / Effect, what I supplied yourselves suggest, / What I leave bare yourselves can now invest'. It is exactly Browning's intention that his epic is 'not at all . . . an achieved form', that 'he works over his vast material' so that 'we then work him over'. Browning and his audience are 'on the same side of the street', and in some ways he intends the 'danger of concussion'--his poetry at least has an impact on the reader's existence, it does not belong to 'the other side, across the way, where we mostly see the poets elegantly walk'.

There are two further points which arise from James' criticisms which are of importance to this section. James seems disconcerted that although we work over Browning's creation as if it were still raw material, we do not avail ourselves 'of a grain he himself doesn't somehow give us' (my emphasis). He admits that he finds the story 'tremendously interesting' and finds an added interest in Browning's 'general perception of it', which he says 'we can't not accept'. This double interest is not unlike the statement in the 'Essay on Shelley' that we receive the facts as a creation (that is, the story and Browning's perception of it). The word 'somehow', which I emphasized in the first quotation, reveals that James does not really understand Browning's art. What he admits here is that although Browning's epic seems to be 'not at all . . . an achieved form, but . . . a mere preparation for one', it is in fact a fully achieved structure, a completely controlled work of art, by which, as Browning says in the 'Essay on Shelley', 'we learn only what he intended we should learn by that particular exercise of his power' (my emphasis).

The second point of interest is that James objects to Browning's intrusion into reality: as a poet he should be 'across the way' and not on the 'same side of the street' as the reader, yet it is this side of the street, the side of reality, which James claims for the novelist. James is describing a demarcation in literature which Browning does not recognize. Again what James intends as a criticism of Browning, is really a sharp insight into the success of Browning's intentions. James more or less admits not only that Browning's subject-matter is in the same territory as the novelist, with the same impact as the novels of the realists, but also that his expression and treatment of this subject-matter is more immediate than prose--Browning's poetry involves the reader in the actual process of creation. The expression, not merely the subject-matter, is an experience of life.

It is clear that the range of subjects which poetry can treat depends on the flexibility of the practice of poetry itself. Browning realized that the ability of poetry to tackle subjects of direct relevance to modern life did not necessarily involve the destruction of poetry as a distinct art-form, but only the destruction of those rules and regulations which no longer served the purposes for which they were originally intended or which no longer applied. As early as Paracelsus (1835) he rejected unhelpful 'restrictions' which were 'scrupulously retained, as though for some special fitness in themselves' (Preface to Paracelsus). Yet if the strict observance of the wholesome laws and regulations of the practice of poetry is rejected, in what way does poetry remain a distinct art-form? How, for example, is it distinguished from prose if its subject-matter and language are not obviously and recognizably poetic?

In 'Transcendentalism' (Men and Women, 1855), he comments on both

the subject-matter and the nature of poetry. The title of the volume is significant: the poet's subject-matter is human knowledge, not abstract thought. In 'Transcendentalism' he says to the would-be poet/philosopher, 'You are a poem, though your poem's naught' (47). The full title, 'Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books' is in itself a comment on the subjects and nature of poetry. Twelve books reveal the poet's attention to the rules of poetry--twelve being the conventional number of books for an epic poem--but such attention does not make a poem. Putting the abstract thoughts on transcendentalism into twelve books and following the rules of poetic practice will not make them any less mere 'dry words'. Browning recognizes the demand in his age for pragmatic didactic poetry--'Stark-naked thought is in request enough: / Speak prose and hollo it till Europe hears!' (10-11), but,

'Tis you speak, that's your error. Song's our art:
Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
Instead of draping them in sights and sounds.
(2-4)

Poetry is distinguished from 'naked thought' by its sensory quality ('sights and sounds'). Poetry is presented as something to be experienced, while prose uses 'dry words' of thought.

In 'Transcendentalism', Browning distinguishes between the poetic use of words and the prosaic use of words which uses them as mere figures for the thought. Poetic words are of sight and sound, their appearance and sound as words, as well as what they express. The poem is something made ('do the thing shall breed the thought'), so that the thought, the meaning, and the subject are in this made-thing, the poem. The poem, then, is not a statement, and its words are not notations with defined meanings regardless of context. The poem is an expression of the poet's

conception: it is a thing made by words which are used for what they can convey of this conception, not for what they normally represent in everyday use. The separate elements which constitute poetry become blurred; the subject-matter cannot be separated from the form or from the language by which it is expressed. An extreme example of this is the Hopkins-like compression of words in 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' (Dramatis Personae, 1864):

Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?
(24)

The words are crammed together in an over-full line to present the whole conception, the actual sense, of satiety. The earlier work Sordello (1840) shows a similar use of language, for example:

'Old Salinguerra in the town once more
Uprooting, overturning, flame before,
Blood fetlock-high beneath him.'
(I, 159-61)

The words are used to give the impression of violence and disorder all around--up, over, before, high, beneath. Yet Salinguerra is in control: he frames the violence, he remains above it.

In Sordello Browning presents two metaphors for language which contrast poetic language and prosaic language. Ordinary language is like a sack which keeps the 'imaged thing' (II, 571) hidden from view. Sordello's ideal poetic language would 'clothe' the imaged thing: it would hold and contain his imagined 'creature' but in no way obscure its actual form. But 'perceptions whole, like that he sought / To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought / As language' (II, 589-91). What Browning seeks to express is pure poetic vision, 'perceptions whole', 'the simultaneous and the sole' (II, 594), 'the whole dream' (II, 603).

Hence the highest poets, 'the best[,] / Impart the gift of seeing to the rest' (III, 867-68). The poet's vision must be clothed in language to form itself into a poem by which the reader may see for himself what the poet saw. The subject of the poem, if it is to convey the poet's conception of it, must dictate the form and treatment it is to receive since the conception takes its shape from the whole poem, indeed the whole poem becomes the conception.

This view of poetry obviously changes the entire idea of poetic boundaries. The notion of a subject-matter or language particularly suitable for poetry or unsuitable for poetry, becomes irrelevant. The kernel of poetry is what the poet envisages, regardless of the actual subject of that vision, but the question which Sordello suggests, and with which Browning was concerned in all of his poetry, is how far this vision or conception of a subject can be articulated and communicated to the reader? This is clearly central to The Ring and the Book.

In Book Twelve, Browning, as the defence lawyer of his own poem and poetics, confidently addresses the jury as the 'British Public, who may like me yet'. Their verdict proved the effectiveness of his presentation of the case, but it was a presentation which, as Henry James said, made it impossible not to accept Browning's 'general perception' of the subject. In Book One Browning admitted that he took a great deal of care to ensure that this time the British Public would like him:

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,
 (God love you!)--whom I yet have laboured for,
 Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
 Than erst whom all, it seemed, could read who ran,--
 Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise
 Than late when he who praised and read and wrote
 Was apt to find himself the self-same me.

(I, 1379-85)

The personal humour aimed at himself is most pleasant: Browning is certainly not on the other side of the street from the reader, but the sense of a special effort is unmistakable.

After The Ring and the Book I believe that Browning assumed that now the British Public understood his art, and that now he truly could use 'brother's speech'. In other words, he assumed that he no longer needed to explain, quite so carefully, his poetic intention. He now expected his readers to 'see it for [themselves]', without the poet chalking 'broadly on each vesture's hem / The wearer's quality' (Sordello, I, 28-29), as he does, to some extent, in Book One of The Ring and the Book. The poems which follow The Ring and the Book are often regarded as an anti-climax, marking the decline of Browning's poetic powers. I believe that this view is erroneous. The poems which follow The Ring and the Book clearly continue the interests and concerns of Browning's earlier poetry, and can only be regarded as marking his decline as a poet if one fails to perceive what those interests and concerns are.

The short section which follows is intended to show that Browning's later poetry continues the interests of The Ring and the Book (and of his earlier poetry), and in particular his interest in the exploration of the boundaries of poetry and the artistic treatment of factual reality.

B. 'THIS EDGE OF THINGS'
 (Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, 187)

The Sailor Language is good in its way; but as wrongly used in Art as real clay and mud would be, if one plastered them in the foreground of a landscape in order to attain so much truth, at all events--the true thing to endeavour is the making a golden colour which shall do every good in the power of the dirty brown.

Browning to E.B.B. on R.H. Horne's Ballad Romances.
 Kintner I, 365 (7 January 1846)

Most of the long poems which follow The Ring and the Book explore the limits of the boundaries of poetry even more boldly than The Ring and the Book. Two poems in particular, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (1873) and The Inn Album (1875), continue the themes and interests of the earlier poem, but with an even greater emphasis on the basis in factual reality, and with an even more obvious excursion into the territory of the novel. Several modern critics have been attracted to these two poems on just this question of Browning's exploration of his art-form.

For example, Charlotte C. Watkins in 'Form and Sense in Browning's The Inn Album', writes: 'The Inn Album is, to a degree, a re-enactment, in terms of pointedly contemporary realism, of the pattern that structured the historical content of The Ring and the Book. The focus, however, is on the principal character, the young rescuer, whose shifting perceptions of the truth . . . are central in the meanings of the poem, as his role is central in its dramatic form' (p. 67). Her observation that Browning concentrates on 'the young rescuer' and his 'shifting perceptions of the

truth' suggests to me that with The Inn Album, Browning actually anticipated Henry James's exposition of how he would rework The Ring and the Book as a novel--'I find that centre [of the poem] in the embracing consciousness of Caponsacchi, which, coming to the rescue of our question of treatment, of our search for a point of control, practically saves everything'.¹⁸ With The Inn Album Browning seems to rework The Ring and the Book to blur, even more completely, the distinctions of genre. Charlotte Watkins observes that 'in its own time, The Inn Album was variously called a sensation novel, a melodrama, and a poetic anomaly' (p. 65). But she also points out that 'references in The Inn Album to contemporary styles in the arts call attention to the poem as a poem and relate it, also, to modern art' (p. 65). Browning's aim is not to destroy poetry as a specific art-form, but to break through arbitrary lines of demarcation and so to 'call attention to the poem as a poem', as something which in itself defines poetry.

With these later poems the questions asked at the beginning of the chapter become extremely pertinent--on what basis are we to judge these poems? If the conventional lines of demarcation between poetry and prose are obliterated, what distinguishes Browning's poetry from prose? Does Browning 'win back territory once held by poetry and now lost to prose' (Drew), or does he enter into the territory of prose, and, as Alfred Austin suggests, disguise prose thoughts in 'half-words cut into lengths' ('The Poetry of the Period', p. 327). These questions have already partly been answered, but it is Browning's later poetry which really tests whether the answers given have any validity. If these poems are failures as poems, then I think that much of Browning's poetic theory must be called into question.

It is not enough to say that it is a worthwhile enterprise for a

poet to attempt to win back territory once held by poetry and now lost to prose, it must also be shown that the disputed territory can be better, or at least differently, served by poetry. If Browning's poetry adds nothing to what a prose account could make of the subject-matter of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country or The Inn Album, then I cannot see that the enterprise was worthwhile, and Alfred Austin's opinions of Browning as a poet must be accepted as having some validity. Austin argues that 'Browning has always been well to the front in the prevailing tone of thought', but of those thoughts he says, 'all that his mechanical Muse can do with them is to churn and muddle them, and the result is that we should infinitely prefer to have them from Mr Browning as Mr Browning himself first received them--in prose' (p. 319).

In a letter dated 27 February 1845, E.B.B. writes that she proposes to write 'a sort of novel-poem--a poem as completely modern as "Geraldine's Courtship", running into the midst of our conventions . . . & so, meeting face to face & without mask the Humanity of the age, & speaking the truth as I conceive of it, out plainly' (Kintner I, 31). On 11 March 1845, Browning replies: 'the poem you propose to make, for the times, the fearless fresh living work you describe,--is the only Poem to be undertaken now by you or anyone that is a Poet at all,--the only reality, the only effective piece of service to be rendered God and man; it is what I have been all my life intending to do' (Kintner I, 36). Browning uses the phrase 'the only reality', which he defines or clarifies as the 'only effective piece of service to be rendered God and man'. This implies that for Browning serious poetry ('anyone that is a Poet at all'), only has a true existence, a reality, if it serves God and man by revealing some truth about 'the Humanity of the age'. I already referred to this letter in Chapter One and associated it with Browning's ideas in

the 'Essay on Shelley'. My point there was to demonstrate Browning's emphasis on the necessity of poetry's contact with reality, but there is the further point that both in the 'Essay' and in this letter Browning stresses poetic innovation--'the poem you propose to make, for the times, the fearless fresh living work'. The enthusiasm of Browning's reply to E.B.B. stems from her description of the work--'a sort of novel-poem', 'completely modern', 'meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age'. In this description, as eventually realized in Browning's poetry, there is much of what made Henry James so uneasy with The Ring and the Book. Browning is a poet who meets the humanity of his age face to face, 'on the same side of the street'. It was this side of the street, the side of reality rather than fancy, which James felt belonged to the novelist, but it is clearly also this side which Browning felt belonged to modern poetry, to a poetry 'for the times'.

The quotation which opened this section shows that Browning was perfectly aware that art does not reveal truth by presenting stark reality. His views are remarkably like George Lewes's comments in his review of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day: 'Realism in Art has Truth as an aim, Ugliness as a pitfall'. Browning says that in art, 'the true thing to endeavour is the making a golden colour which shall do every good in the power of the dirty brown'. This can be compared to what he says in The Ring and the Book: 'Prime nature with an added artistry--/ No carat lost, and you have gained a ring' (I, 29-30).

In the 'Prologue' to Asolando: Fancies and Facts (1889) he writes:

Friend, did you need an optic glass,
Which were your choice? A lens to drape
In ruby, emerald, chrysopras,
Each object--or reveal its shape
Clear outlined, past escape,

The naked very thing?--so clear
That, when you had the chance to gaze,
You found its inmost self appear
Through outer seeming--truth ablaze,
Not falsehood's fancy-haze?

(11-20)

The 'Prologue' is a difficult poem to interpret, but it is also an important one in attempting to understand Browning's poetic ideas. To which realm does poetry belong, fancy or fact? Both or neither? I have argued that Browning believed that poetry should not be an escape into an ideal or fantasy world, but should be a revelation of some truth about mankind. At the same time, Browning clearly rejects stark realism: the subject of the poem must have some basis in reality, in the world as it is, but the poet's concern is with the artistic communication of his poetic insight into the truth of some aspect of reality. The two stanzas from the 'Prologue' support this interpretation.

In Sordello the best poets are the 'Makers-see', and in 'Fra Lippo Lippi' the painter makes the viewer see the beauty and significance of 'things we have passed / Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see' (301-02). The poet does not present the reader with a mere vision of factual reality. I am stressing this point because there is a difficulty of interpretation in the 'Prologue' which affects this statement.¹⁹ In the stanzas quoted the 'friend' (reader) is offered two kinds of poetry. Significantly the metaphor for poetry is an 'optic glass', something through which we view the world and which alters our normal vision of the world. The friend can have a 'lens' which will 'drape / In ruby, emerald,

chrysoptas, / Each object' (cf. 'De Lairese', 'Fancy's rainbow-birth', 101), that is, he is offered poetry which makes reality more colourful but which also removes man further from the white light of truth. In Browning, truth, particularly absolute truth, is usually associated with pure white light. For example, in 'Nympholeptos' (in Pacchiarotto, 1876), the absolute is the nymph of 'the quintessential whiteness' (99), while the imperfect man is 'jewelled as with drops o' the urn / The rainbow paints from' (120-21).

The reader's other choice in the 'Prologue' is a poetry which will reveal 'the naked very thing', 'you found its inmost self appear / Through outer seeming--truth ablaze' (my emphasis). In The Two Poets of Croisic (1878) Browning writes:

But truth, truth, that's the gold! and all the good
I find in fancy is, it serves to set
Gold's inmost glint free . . .
. . . All fume and fret
Of artistry beyond this point pursued
Brings out another sort of burnish.
(my emphasis, CLII)

By relating the two poems, a number of points are suggested. First, the poet's aim is not to present a picture of reality, but to present truth. Secondly, fancy is essential to the poet, even if his aim is to present 'truth ablaze, / Not falsehood's fancy-haze', because it is fancy which allows him to communicate his vision of truth to the reader-- 'you [the reader] found its inmost self appear', 'fancy . . . serves to set / Gold's inmost glint free'. Thirdly, the stanza from The Two Poets of Croisic suggests that fancy should not be used to alter the truth. Fancy should only be used to reveal the 'glint' of the gold, not to produce 'another sort of burnish'.

For Browning the essence of poetry is, as I argued in Chapter Two,

conception and communication, that is, the poet's vision of his subject and the communication of that vision to the reader. For Browning the differences between poetry and the novel are essential differences and not superficial ones. I believe that the main point of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album is not to show the similarities between poetry and the novel, but to reveal the differences. The subject-matter, the modern time setting, the realism, are all aspects of the greatest of the contemporary novels, but poetry can share these aspects and remain poetry because the essence of poetry is the poet's conception and communication. Poetry is an 'optic glass': it is not what we look at that determines our vision, but how we are made to see what we look at.

Browning assumes that poetry is distinguished from the novel on two main points. The poet is not concerned with the surface of life, with detailed descriptions of background, events, or the appearance of characters (cf. Sordello, 'leave the mere rude / Explicit details'), this kind of realism is the shell which the poet's vision pierces to reveal truth. Browning implies that the poet's concern is not with the appearances of life, with what men say and do (the main territory of the nineteenth-century novelist), but with the thoughts and emotions of man, with the soul of man. He repeats this idea in poems and letters over and over again. Yet he does not suggest that the novelist is inferior to the poet but rather that the poet and the novelist deal with two different views of truth. The poet sets 'gold's inmost glint free'. The novelist points to the gold in the 'rough ore': his work is true to the world as most men see it. Secondly, Browning assumes that poetry differs from the novel in the way in which the reader is made to see truth. In a letter to E.B.B. of 10 August 1845, Browning suggests that

the novelist offers a direct communication--the 'out blurting of a phrase, and the miracle is achieved'. (This letter is quoted more fully on p. 148.) In this letter Browning differentiates between language used for direct statement (prose), and the poetic use of language which creates an experience from which the reader comes to perceive the poet's vision.²⁰ For the poet 'there is no standing by . . . and telling you'.

In the letter which introduces Asolando: Fancies and Facts, Browning explains the title. He says that 'Asolare' means "'to disport in the open air, amuse oneself at random"'. The full title, then, suggests a playing with 'fancies and facts'. I would suggest that the serious playfulness of this last volume is something which should be recognized as characterizing much of the poetry which follows The Ring and the Book. In the remainder of this section I do not intend to offer any detailed examination of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country or The Inn Album, instead I shall suggest some of the ways in which Browning 'disports' with poetry and explores the territory of his art. I shall look first at The Inn Album.

I

With The Inn Album Browning very clearly ventures into the realm of the novel. Charlotte Watkins, in her article on the poem, observes that 'the very selection of contemporary upper-middle-class life as a subject was an especially modern undertaking in the mid-seventies, within a twelve-month period that included both Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now and George Eliot's Daniel Deronda' (p. 65).

Swinburne called it, 'a fine study in the later manner of Balzac'.²¹

I find it strongly reminiscent of Dickens: the Elder Man bears a resemblance to Sir Mulberry Hawk (Nicholas Nickleby), there is much Dickensian melodrama about the poem, as well as the Dickensian habit of drawing characters together for the grand finale (no matter how unlikely the possibility of this happening in real life), and both Dickens and Browning share what is essentially a dramatic imagination. If subject-matter determines the art-form, then The Inn Album should have been a novel or a melodrama. What is gained by Browning's treatment of the subject? What is it that poetry can do that a prose account of the subject, whether as a novel or a play, could not do?

With Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and The Inn Album, Browning demonstrates, as he did in The Ring and the Book, that the subjects of poetry can be found among the common bric-à-brac of life. But Browning also means more than this: it is the poet who sees, and who can make his reader see, the deeper significance of what seems 'earth's surface blank'. This is made clear in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country. Browning says he likes 'the quiet seaside country',

just because
 Nothing is prominently likeable
 To vulgar eye without a soul behind,
 Which, breaking surface, brings before the ball
 Of sight, a beauty buried everywhere.
 If we have souls, know how to see and use,
 One place performs, like any other place,
 The proper service every place on earth
 Was framed to furnish man with.

(53-61)

With insight, any subject becomes meaningful and significant, an illustration of the truth of man's being, and of his reason for living. In The Inn Album the poetic vision of the subject is skilfully

communicated. In 'The Inn Album: A Record of 1875', Ashby Bland Crowder says: 'It should be noted . . . that after Browning clearly establishes the contemporary setting (there are twenty-three details in Section I that obviously indicate the poem's topicality), he finds it necessary only occasionally to remind the reader of when the action is taking place' (p. 44). The surface of life gradually gives way to human concerns which are eternal and elemental. Without changing our impression of the subject as something contemporary and realistic, we recognize in the subject aspects of the same great issues of moral choice explored in the Medieval morality plays, The Ring and the Book, Milton's Comus, and most especially Paradise Lost. As I shall demonstrate, what Browning achieves through poetry is immense concentration and complexity. The surface of life, its material and temporal aspects, are perfectly balanced with the eternal moral and spiritual aspects which lie beneath the surface, and this dual vision is communicated to the reader through poetic language and through the techniques of poetry.²²

The language of The Inn Album is very close to prose, in particular the rhythms of natural speech are beautifully caught. For example, the Elder Man describes the effect of losing the lady:

'Slowly, surely, creeps
Day by day o'er me the conviction--here
Was life's prize grasped at, gained, and then let go!
--That with her--may be, for her--I had felt
Ice in me melt, grow steam, drive to effect
Any or all the fancies sluggish here
I' the head that needs the hand she would not take
And I shall never lift now.

.

The steam congeals once more: I'm old again!
Therefore I hate myself--but how much worse
Do not I hate who would not understand,
Let me repair things--no, but sent a-slide

My folly falteringly, stumblingly
 Down, down and deeper down until I drop
 Upon--the need of your ten thousand pounds
 And consequently loss of mine! I lose
 Character, cash, nay, common-sense itself
 Recounting such a lengthy cock-and-bull
 Adventure--lose my temper in the act . . . '
 (809-16, 822-32)

The speaking voice, its changes in tone, its pauses, is well conveyed and strikes one as naturalistic. Yet the emotional changes within the speech are made clear to the reader through the techniques of poetry. The alliteration in 'slowly, surely', the commas after each of those words, the repetition in 'day by day', express the dull emptiness of life without the lady. There is an active tension in the next line as the Elder Man thinks over the sequence of events--'grasped at, gained, and then let go!' (one imagines his hand acting out the movement of grasp and release). The alliteration connects the sequence, and the short alliterative word, 'go', in a phrase made up of monosyllabic words, makes the language create for us a picture of the dispersal and loss of his 'prize'. The line which follows again changes the tone and pace. The use of the dashes breaks the line up and slows the process of thought to express depth of feeling, emphasized by a perfect rhyme and poetic image--'I had felt / Ice in me melt'. The Elder Man is given an emotional depth and complexity absent in, for example, Sir Mulberry Hawk.

Throughout the speech there is also an undercurrent of allusion to Paradise Lost. These allusions do not have a simple one to one correspondence: the Elder Man is not identified solely with Satan, though this is the main correspondence. If Browning uses poetic language to add an emotional depth to the character which engages our sympathy, he uses the allusions to add an intellectual depth to our

understanding of the character. The lady's rejection of the Elder Man, 'the hand she would not take', 'who would not understand, / Let me repair things', contrasts with what happens in Paradise Lost, where mutual forgiveness and understanding lead to the conclusion of 'hand in hand with wandring steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitarie way'. Her rejection of him leaves both of them in a fallen state. His phrase, 'And I shall never lift now', refers to her hand and also to his state, a point which is emphasized in lines which recall Satan's fall from Heaven: 'but sent a-slide / My folly falteringly, stumblingly / Down, down and deeper down'. He then breaks off into what strikes the reader as particularly prosaic and harshly down-to-earth language.

The whole sequence of the speech is very similar to Satan's speech to Beëlzebub (I, 84ff). Satan's long speech swerves through several changes of direction, from outbursts to hesitations, which reveal his emotional state, then, like the Elder Man, he recovers himself and returns to his more usual mode of speech which masks his true feelings (in Satan's case the masking speech is a balanced rhetoric, for example, 'What though the field be lost?' (I, 105); in the case of the Elder Man, it is a casual, man-about-town mode of speech). The phrase, 'Therefore I hate myself', recalls Satan's 'my self am Hell' (IV, 75). If the references to Paradise Lost are not particularly striking in this passage they become more obvious as the poem progresses (for example, 2042, 2224-31, 2242-43, 2418, 2611-15, 2653-55, 3013). Yet because Browning has created such a solid sense of contemporary reality, these allusions never threaten to destroy the impression that this is a poem 'for the times'. By metaphor and allusion the poet can pass beyond the singularity of the subject to suggest the eternal struggle between good

and evil in each individual. At the same time he can also heighten our belief in the individuality of each of the characters, our belief in them as real human beings. In this area, Browning challenges the novelists in their own territory.

I have already briefly indicated how Browning uses the techniques of poetry to suggest the emotions of the Elder Man. The somewhat stock melodramatic characters of seducer and wronged lady are here so well rounded psychologically that both take on tragic proportions not to be found in contemporary novels handling the same theme. Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891) has much in common with The Inn Album, including allusions to the Eden story and Paradise Lost. But Alec d'Urberville is a two-dimensional figure, and instead of expanding his character, the references to Satan only serve to make him even more of a cardboard cut-out, a mere device of the plot, appearing and disappearing as the author's need dictates. In Chapter L, d'Urberville reappears in Tess's life to draw her into the final circumstances which will conclude the novel. While it is clear what Hardy attempts to do by alluding to Satan's temptation of Eve, the allusion intrudes and weakens the credibility of Hardy's story--so much so that what should be a climactic scene borders on the absurd. 'The fire flared up, and she beheld the face of d'Urberville.' He also happens to be carrying a pitchfork, and to heighten the association, Hardy makes him say, 'You are Eve, and I am the old Other One come to tempt you', and even makes him quote from Paradise Lost.

In The Inn Album the poetry carries such allusions without incongruity. The Elder Man in lines 2601-28 is very obviously cast as the Satanic tempter. The reference to the Tree of Knowledge is unmistakable, but it is not at all forced.

'Man, since you have instruction, blush no more!
 Such your five minutes' profit by my pains,
 'Tis simply now--demand and be possessed!
 Which means---you may possess---may strip the tree
 Of fruit desirable to make one wise.
 More I nor wish nor want: your act's your act,
 My teaching is but--there's the fruit to pluck
 Or let alone at pleasure.'

(2608-15)

Although poetry, the speech actually seems more natural than d'Urberville's prose lines, and as poetry, the speech can carry more meaning. For example, the 'fruit' also refers to the woman. He goes on: 'Don't expect / I bid a novice--pluck, suck, send sky-high / Such fruit (2616-18). The tone of the passage is strongly reminiscent of 'A Light Woman'. As with that earlier poem, the brutal sensuousness of the speaker's attitude to the 'fruit' adds to our understanding of the character--'strip the tree / Of fruit desirable', 'pluck, suck, send sky-high'. Compare this last phrase to the phrase from the quotation given earlier--'life's prize grasped at, gained, and then let go!' While one is sympathetic, the other is cruel and sordid, yet both clearly belong to the same character. By mirroring the phrases in this way, Browning suggests to the reader (indirectly through the poetry itself), that the lady's rejection of the Elder Man is more justifiable than it may at first have seemed. As a description of her treatment by the Elder Man, the brutality and harshness of it explains her own hardness and coldness. 'Pluck, suck, send sky-high' explains how her life has been broken off from its natural development, sapped of its sweetness and vitality, and then thrown away.

Browning's portrait of the lady is a sharp contrast to the presentation of women in most of the English novels of his time. There is no sentimentalisation or softening of the character. The section

in which she describes her decision to marry the poor elderly parish priest who wanted 'a helpmate' 'who would play ministrant to sickness, age, / Womenkind, childhood' (1639, 1642-43), recalls Jane Eyre's temptation by St John Rivers to sacrifice herself to the cause of duty and religion. But even though Jane Eyre rejects this temptation, she at least sees the nobility of such service, and St John himself is presented as a handsome and heroic soldier of Christ.

The lady in The Inn Album breaks through conventional ideals of the pious philanthropic little woman, suffering in service without complaint. Her description of her parishioners is extremely blunt and harshly matter of fact:

'Being brutalized
Their true need is brute-language, cheery grunts
And kindly cluckings, no articulate
Nonsense that's elsewhere knowledge. Tend the sick,
Sickened myself at pig-perversity,
Cat-craft, dog-snarling,--may be, snapping . . . '
(1679-84)

There is no gentleness or pity in her description, and she concludes, with mounting bitterness, by presenting a vision of the country people as half-domesticated brutes. The hatred with which she addresses the Elder Man and recounts her life with her husband, reveals the extent of her fall. The Elder Man answers by saying:

'Love once and you love always. Why, it's down
Here in the Album: every lover knows
Love may use hate but--turn to hate, itself--
Turn even to indifference--no, indeed!'
(1852-55)

The lines are ironic: after his rejection, his own love turns to hate. For the reader there is no easy judgment. The allusions to Paradise Lost, unlike those in Tess, do not simplify our understanding of the

characters--the Elder Man is both good and evil, the lady is both likened to Eve, and contrasted with Eve.

The reference in the last quotation to the album and its conventional platitudes such as 'Love once and you love always', draws attention to a major theme of the poem. The inn album is in itself a piece of literature and also an essential part of the action of the poem. Charlotte Watkins, in her article on the poem, observes that the line, 'Hail, calm acclivity, salubrious spot!', 'seems to parody a bad imitation of Cowper's poetic diction, to provide an instance of what Browning might have described explicitly as "the straw of last year's harvest"' (p. 74). The poem has numerous references to changes in artistic tastes and styles, and to old and new works of art. Browning's own poem, its modern subject and innovative treatment, suggests that art must constantly re-examine the eternal problems of making the correct choice, must relate back to reality, and so must constantly change its mode of expression to meet 'face to face the Humanity of the age'. Although Browning's language is close to prose, the comparison to the 'poetic' jottings in the album demonstrates that Browning's use of language evokes the atmosphere of the setting, and the souls of the characters, better than a high poetic diction. In 'Transcendentalism' the distinction between poetry and prose is that poetry creates the very thing--the poet 'vents a brace of rhymes, / And in there breaks the sudden rose herself, / Over us, under, round us every side' (39-41). For Browning, a poem is not true poetry if it becomes mere language ('dry words'), even if that language is traditionally regarded as poetic.

II

With The Inn Album Browning does not intrude as a narrator, and his 'disporting' with poetry is not so much carried on in the poetry of the poem itself, as included as a theme within the poem. The development of art, and the changes in poetic styles, are explored mainly by direct allusion to earlier or contemporary works which contrast with or complement Browning's own poetic treatment of the subject.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country the disporting with poetry underlies and dominates the whole poem. The poem opens by discussing subject-matter. Browning likes 'the quiet seaside country' 'just because / Nothing is prominently likable' (52, 54-55). He obviously likes the subject of the poem for the same reason. The poet 'breaking surface' reveals 'a beauty buried everywhere' (56, 57): a narrow insignificant subject is made to reveal some truth which lies beneath the surface of all life. He goes on to argue that the ugliness of a subject may serve to heighten the impact of the poet's revelation by concentrating the reader's vision on the poetic insight into the subject, rather than on the subject itself. He expresses this by describing how the clarity and brilliance of the sun's light is better recognized through a crack in the roof of a dark cell than filtered and dispersed through 'palace-panes'.

Earth's ugliest walled and ceiled imprisonment
 May suffer, through its single rent in roof,
 Admittance of a cataract of light
 Beyond attainment through earth's palace-panes
 Pinholed athwart their windowed filagree
 By twinklings sobered from the sun outside.
 (65-70)

Another important question about Browning's subject-matter receives

an answer in this poem. In 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' (Men and Women, 1855), Blougram says:

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.
 The honest thief, the tender murderer,
 The superstitious atheist, demirep
 That loves and saves her soul in new French books--
 We watch while those in equilibrium keep
 The giddy line midway: one step aside,
 They're classed and done with.

(395-41)

The list sounds very like much of Browning's subject-matter. The refusal to class and be done with a subject is clear in almost all of Browning's poetry; it is part of what I called the 'unsolved' quality of his work, part of his inclusion of the processes of analysis and discovery in the art of poetry. But Red Cotton Night-Cap Country adds another answer to Browning's love of the 'edge of things' (187).

On beach, mere razor-edge 'twixt earth and sea,
 I stand at such a distance from the world
 That 'tis the whole world which obtains regard,
 Rather than any part.

(181-84)

The 'edge of things', a phrase used in both poems, is true of Browning's choice of subject and of his poetry which plays on the boundaries of his art. The 'razor-edge', 'the dangerous edge', expresses something of the pleasure of Browning's poetry.

In some measure, all of Browning's verse 'disports' with poetry itself, challenging, testing, experimenting with the ideas of what poetry is. In the quotation above Browning suggests that it is by keeping to the 'mere razor-edge' that one sees 'the whole world . . . rather than any part'. By writing what Henry James called 'neither prose nor poetry', Browning is able to go beyond the limits imposed by traditional notions of what poetry can and cannot do. His territory becomes 'the whole world',

he cannot be relegated to 'the other side' of the street. The quotation also suggests that by choosing subjects on the edge of things he can gain the most comprehensive and truest vision. In the darkness of 'walled and ceiled imprisonment' the 'cataract of light' is seen in its purest form. By standing 'on beach' he stands 'at such a distance from the world / That 'tis the whole world which obtains regard'. The implication is that by choosing a superficially unattractive subject he can detach himself from the subject itself to see clearly the truth within the subject and to view that truth as a truth relating to all life.

The title of the poem, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers, draws attention to two main themes. First, the contrast between what seems to be true and what is true. Just as the seemingly peaceful inn was in fact the setting for suicide and murder, so 'the quiet seaside country' of white night-caps is the setting for violence and death. Secondly, turf and towers represents the two opposites between which the protagonist must choose. Both titles illustrate the 'razor-edge' interest of Browning's poetry. Browning seems deliberately to choose the abnormal:

'White Cotton Night-cap Country: excellent!
Why not Red Cotton Night-cap Country too?

'Why not say swans are black and blackbirds white,
Because the instances exist?' you ask.
'Enough that white, not red, predominates,
Is normal, typical.'

(331-36)

But Browning's point is that pure white is not normal. Miss Thackeray argues on:

'Let be' (you say), 'the universe at large
 Supplied us with exceptions to the rule,
 So manifold, they bore no passing-by,--
 Little Saint-Rambert has conserved at least
 The pure tradition: white from head to heel.'
 (342-46)

Browning uses 'little Saint-Rambert' to illustrate a truth about 'the universe at large'. Saint-Rambert is not 'the pure tradition': it is on the edge between white and red. It is not one or the other, but both. Browning asks, 'Why not Red Cotton Night-cap Country too?' (my emphasis). Similarly, Miranda's life cannot be understood unless one recognizes the pull of both turf and tower, the vacillation between the materialistic and spiritual worlds. The title, then, focuses on Browning's poetic vision of the subject, and not on the ostensible subject itself, the story of Léonce Miranda.

In 'Browning's Narrative Art' (1975), Robert Felgar observes that with this poem,

Browning is parodying our conventional notion that a good story should have a straight-forward narrative line, with few digressions and much surprise and suspense. . . . the real story of course lies below the surface: this is why the gardener who picks up Miranda's corpse assumes Miranda's leap was suicide, while Browning makes a case for it as the result of spiritual confusion. He violates so many rules of conventional storytelling art because they hinder the revelation of psychological complexity. (p. 93)

Felgar's points about Browning's parodying of conventional notions and his concentration on psychological complexity, support my central view of the poem as being a poem about poetry. But Browning is not so much parodying conventional notions of what a good story is, as indicating the differences between what a novelist does and what a poet should do.

As I argued in Chapter Two, the poet's disruption of normal

expectations is part of his art--a way of making the reader see something in a new light, or of revealing something never observed before. The poet is involved in a constant striving forward to advance the development of man.

Artistry being battle with the age
 It lives in! Half life,--silence, while you learn
 What has been done; the other half,--attempt
 At speech, amid world's wail of wonderment--
 'Here's something done was never done before!'
 To be the very breath that moves the age
 Means not to have breath drive you bubble-like
 Before it--but yourself to blow: that's strain.
 (2081-88)

Browning's poetry contrasts with the subject of the poem, Léonce Miranda, by battling with the conventions of the era. Miranda allows the conventions of the age to blow him 'bubble-like / Before it'. Miranda's attitude to art is also his attitude to life:

Always Art's seigneur, not Art's serving-man
 Whate'er the style and title and degree,--
 That is the quiet life and easy death
 Monsieur Léonce Miranda would approve
 Wholly.
 (2103-07)

His desire for the 'quiet life' means that he consistently avoids effort: he does not judge or decide for himself, but accepts the imposition of judgments and decisions from outside himself, or seeks a compromise.

The poem itself is an example of 'artistry being battle with the age'. The passage on Joseph Milsand acts as an example of how life must also be 'battle with the age', a constant effort to seek after truth. Like the poet, he 'paces the beach' (2915); breaks through the surface appearance to see into the soul,

That man will read you rightly head to foot,
 Mark the brown face of you, the bushy beard,
 The breadth 'twixt shoulderblades, and through each black
 Castilian orbit, see into your soul.

(2899-902)

and tests institutions and conventions by 'his own intelligence' (2934):

sounding to the bottom ignorance
 Historical and philosophical
 And moral and religious, all one couch
 Of crassitude, a portent of its kind.

(2925-28)

Miranda is content to be a 'dreamer' (2168), to shut eyes to what is
 disturbing:

How could he doubt that all offence outside,--
Wrong to the towers, which, pillowed on the turf,
 He thus shut eyes to,--were as good as gone?

(my emphasis, 2141-43)

The passage on Milsand concentrates on active intelligence and justice
 (that is, judging or deciding correctly):

from his own intelligence,
 Able to help you onward in the path
 Of rectitude whereto your face is set,
 And counsel justice.

(2934-37)

This is just what the poem concentrates on. While Miss Thackeray
 readily accepts the appearance of things for what they are in reality,
 Browning questions appearances. Miranda is assumed to have committed
 suicide, and possibly to have been mad, Browning looks deeper and
 attempts to do the man justice.

Just after the Milsand passage Browning says he will not inquire
 into 'the originals of faith' (2950), but if he is not concerned with
 the origins of faith he is very much concerned with faith itself. The

line 'How substitute thing meant for thing expressed' (2959) is central to Miranda's dilemma and to the poet's problems of communication. In Aristophanes' Apology the modern poet or artist aims to make myth 'intelligible to our time' (2205) by getting back to reality. The old artist sought to 'embellish fact' (2200), using a 'sphinx' to express a bull, 'genuine actual roarer' (2204). The modern artist 'both means and makes the thing!' (2207). In Aristophanes' Apology progress is the disembellishing of myth to return to fact.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Miranda does not progress, but accepts the myth as fact, accepts without question the word ('thing expressed') as the 'thing meant'.

This Ravissante, now: when he saw the church
 For the first time, and to his dying day,
 His firm belief was that the name fell fit
 From the Delivering Virgin, niched and known;
 As if there wanted records to attest
 The appellation was a pleasantry,
 A pious rendering of Rare Vissante,
 The proper name which erst our province bore.
 (1182-89)

Miranda assumes that the name of the church has a direct association with the Virgin (the real name of the church, La Délivrante, makes this association more obvious and understandable), but, as Browning makes clear, there is no association between the name of the church and the Virgin. The lines which follow provide a whole list of examples of Miranda's 'thick feather-bed / Of thoughtlessness' (1178-79). For example, he accepts that 'miracle / Succeeded miracle' (1211-12), and,

These facts, sucked in along with mother's milk,
 Monsieur Léonce Miranda would dispute
 As soon as that his hands were flesh and bone.
 (1217-19)

Immediately before the Milsand passage, the narrator says:

Now, this is native land of miracle.
 O why, why, why, from all recorded time,
 Was miracle not wrought once, only once,
 To help whoever wanted help indeed?
 (2867-70)

The facts Miranda knows are not facts at all. The true story about the name of the church and about miracles can be learned from factual records. The observation that he would dispute these facts 'as soon as that his hands were flesh and bone', points forward to the episode in which Miranda burns off his hands to cure the ills of his soul because of 'the doctrine he was dosed with from his youth-- / "Pain to the body--profit to the soul"' (2518-19). Unlike Milsand or the poet, Miranda does not use his intelligence to test the truth of 'these facts' or 'the doctrine'.

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is one of the finest examples of Browning's inclusion of analysis and discovery as part of the pleasure of poetry. The fabric of the poem itself teases the reader into an understanding of Miranda's intellectual and spiritual confusion, and this is crucial to Browning's poetic purpose. His understanding of poetry is based on the poet's conception of his subject and his communication of that conception to the reader. To Domett he said, 'I have got such a subject for a poem, if I can do justice to it' (DeVane, Handbook, p. 372). The difficulty of doing justice to the subject was the problem of communicating to the reader his understanding of Miranda's state of mind, a state of mind very alien to the common-sense Victorian Protestants who formed the mass of Browning's readership. As with Sordello and The Ring and the Book, the process of the creation of the poem becomes in some measure the product, or poem itself. But with Red Cotton Night-Cap Country Browning exploits this with exceptional

skill. The process of the creation of the poem is also the process by which we come to perceive Browning's view of Miranda. Miranda's seemingly stupid confusion of the name of the thing for the thing itself becomes pitiable and tragic. At the start of the poem Browning is so provoking and perverse in his quibbling over words and meanings that we are tempted into a similar position to Miranda's, in that we choose to accept the word for the thing without true consideration. Like Anne Thackeray we believe that night-caps are night-caps, and fiddles fiddles. Browning goes on 'to recognize / Distinctions' (246-47). Words must be regarded in a strict context of time and place if they are to have any real meaning.

Charlotte C. Watkins in 'Browning's Red Cotton Night-Cap Country and Carlyle' (1964), demonstrates how Browning uses Carlyle, and particularly his French Revolution, 'as a symbol for his own narrative. In the new context, Carlyle's image [the red night-cap] . . . retains its connotation of revolutionary change. The narrator announces Carlyle's contemporary art as his model, by contrast with his auditor's [Anne Thackeray's] Cowperian mode: "White Cotton Night-cap Country: excellent! / Why not Red Cotton Night-cap Country too?" (331-332)' (p. 364). Again as in The Inn Album, a change in literary style is connected to changes in actual life: the same mode of expression cannot serve all ages. In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Browning sports with language and human perception in something of the manner of his opening of the 'Parleying with Charles Avison':

How strange!--but, first of all, the little fact
Which led my fancy forth.

The 'little fact' is nothing more than a 'blackcap' (17) taking a

'cloth-shred' (19) in the month of March. March leads to the marches of Charles Avison. The only connection between a blackcap and Charles Avison is the word 'march', a connection which has no meaning outside the mind of Robert Browning.

In Red Cotton Night-Cap Country there is a similar play with language and meaning. From an exclamation of 'Fiddle!' (244), we move to the Kensington 'Fiddle-Show' (251) with its 'three hundred violin-varieties' (274). More importantly, the reader is dazzled by the complex associations attached to 'night-cap'. We shift from the head-dress of a region to the way in which such a head-dress assumes different meanings and shades at different times to different people. To Miranda, words are the actual things; to Clara "'Words are but words and wind"' (2329),²³ and she goes on to observe just this fact that human perception is relative:

Age quarrels because spring puts forth a leaf
While winter has a mind that boughs stay bare.
(2332-33)

Browning bonds life and art: in both realms words must be constantly tested against things, against reality, so that a true correspondence between 'thing expressed' and the actual object may be established.

The poem works on the two levels of appearance and inner truth. The prosaic elements of the story--the distasteful subject-matter of Miranda's life and death, and our somewhat over-boisterous chatty narrator--form the surface which the poetry pierces to extend and control the meaning of the poem. The poem opens on this theme of the poet 'breaking surface' (56), and before the climax of Miranda's leap Browning again emphasizes this theme:

He thought . . .

(Suppose I should prefer 'He said'?
 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.
 Part these, and thought withdraws to poetry:
 Speech is reported in the newspaper.)
 (3276-84)

This echoes the earlier passage in several ways. The thoughts 'impalpable / To ordinary human faculty' recall the poet's liking for the country 'just because / Nothing is prominently likable / To vulgar eye' (53-55). The poet who reveals 'the thoughts which give the act significance', echoes the idea of the lines, 'through the place he sees, / A place is signified he never sees' (62-63).

Browning's revelation of the thoughts of Miranda is a revelation about how the world is perceived by man. First, the actions which we see, and which we do, are prompted and given significance by our thoughts, but thoughts are 'impalpable / To ordinary human faculty'. Secondly, it follows that no one really sees the world in its absolute truth. How do we know that the way in which we see the world is true? Can any vision of life be accepted as permanent and absolute? By Miranda's final speech (or reported thoughts) these questions have been so skilfully interwoven into the poem that his dilemma is no longer alien and unsympathetic, and his leap to his death is no longer an indisputable act of madness. The magnitude of this achievement can be gauged by considering the differences between the facts of the case 'reported in the newspapers' and Browning's exploration of Miranda's 'thought [which] withdraws to poetry'. A blunt report of Miranda's deeds suggests no relation between his eccentric life and death and mankind in general. By revealing the thoughts behind the

actions, Browning demonstrates the universal significances of his subject.

'The Buried Life' (Arnold) or 'the Hidden Life' (Dallas) touch on the deep Victorian interest in psychology. In 1831 W.J. Fox felt that the 'science of the mind' provided the poet with a new world to discover. In 1869, H.B. Forman regarded Browning as the leader of the Psychological school of poetry, and saw The Ring and the Book as the 'Epic of Psychology'. It is with Red Cotton Night-Cap Country that one perceives how such a poetry defies any 'boundaries': its limits are the limits of man's mind. 'Who is a poet needs must apprehend / Alike both speech and thoughts'. 'Apprehend' functions as meaning to 'seize or capture' and to 'perceive or understand', and these meanings apply to both the poet's apprehension of his subject and the way in which he must make the reader apprehend his subject. The poet must perceive and understand, but he must also capture this perception in speech (or words). 'The thoughts which give the act significance' are the thoughts of the character examined by the poet, and the thoughts of the poet on the subject of his poem. In the conclusion to the poem Browning describes how 'in a flash' (4233) he saw 'all this poor story--truth and nothing else' (4235). He asks us to

Accept that moment's flashing, amplified,
Impalpability reduced to speech,
 Conception proved by birth,--no other change!
 Can what Saint-Rambert flashed me in a thought, ²⁴
 Good gloomy London make a poem of?
 (my emphasis, 4236-40)

There are obvious echoes here of lines 3276-84, quoted earlier. (I have emphasized the main correspondences.) The poem is the 'impalpable' thought 'reduced to speech'. The suggestion is of the infinite concentrated

into the finite. Yet poetry is not a direct communication by speech (language): poetry is a process by which the reader is made to see what 'flashed [upon the poet] in a thought'.

In a letter of 14 June 1845, Browning wrote to E.B.B. that the poem is a 'reflection' of the original inspiration: "'Reflection" is exactly what it names itself--a re-presentation, in scattered rays from every angle of incidence, of what first of all became present in a great light, a whole one' (Kintner I, 95). The 'moment's flashing' is 'amplified', and, with a nice pun on the word 'conception', Browning says that the reader comes to see his conception of the subject by the 'birth' of the poem--that is, by the whole process of the making of the poem which produces, and is, the poem.

Is Red Cotton Night-Cap Country a successful poem? The question is difficult since the answer involves the whole problem of what is meant by poetry. Certainly the reader's experience of the subject is a poetic experience: it is the use of the techniques of poetry which communicates the significance of the subject. The poem revolves around the poetic metaphors of the title, night-caps, and turf and towers. The poetic qualities of the poem are heightened, not lessened, by being brought into such close association with the subject-matter of prose. Passages of direct narrative are pierced by similes or poetic images which often connect to earlier or later images, so that beneath the surface of a seemingly prosaic narrative, the poetry suggests greater depths of meaning. For example, when Clara tells Miranda the truth about her background, Browning compares her to 'the hashish-man' (1643). The passage refers to 'Paradise' (1648) and 'the brain / Of dreamer' (1650). The emphasis in the passage is on drugs, disguise, and deceit-- themes which run throughout the poem and which relate to religion, love,

art, architecture, and language. Man's entire vision of life, and his ability to communicate his vision is examined. A carpet 'hides the soil' (1645) so that the dreamer is 'unaware of muck' (1653). Clara sees that now 'she might boldly pluck from underneath / Her lover the preliminary lie' (1656-57). The passage is immediately preceded by a section on Miranda's other lady, 'the Ravissante' (1622), and by a reference to 'dose . . . of truth remedial' (1637-38).

In a later passage, Miranda's drugged, dreamy state is taken up again at his time of awakening. The division between the Ravissante and Clara is again referred to: 'Wrong to the towers, which, pillowed on the turf, / He thus shut eyes to' (2142-43). His awakening echoes the references to Paradise and dreaming given earlier:

And so slipt pleasantly away five years
Of Paradisiac dream; till, as there flit
Premonitory symptoms, pricks of pain,
Because the dreamer has to start awake
And find disease dwelt active all the while
In head or stomach through the night-long sleep.
(2165-70)

The allusions to dose and drug now become associated with disease. The dose of truth which is 'remedial' is not applied, instead he is dosed with false 'truths' which pain the body and do not cure the disease of soul. 'The doctrine he was dosed with from his youth-- / "Pain to the body--profit to the soul"' (2518-19). In the speech before his leap, Miranda wonders 'should I dare the dream impossible . . . ?' (3564). The sickness theme is used again: "'The Ravissante, you ravish men away / From puny aches and petty pains"' (3386-87). The line in which Clara plucks 'from underneath / Her lover the preliminary lie' is recalled in Miranda's death-fall. His leap is based on 'the preliminary lie' that the Ravissante image is,

'the Queen of Angels: when
 You front us in a picture, there flock they,
 Angels around you, here and everywhere.
 Therefore, to prove indubitable faith,
 Those angels that acknowledge you their queen,
 I summon them to bear me to your feet.'
 (3514-19)

The lie is plucked away and he falls to his death. The reverberation of images, similes, and metaphors, plays through even the most prosaic passages without destroying the surface realism.

In the quotation which opens this section, Browning states that stark realism should not be used in art 'to attain so much truth'. In all of Browning's poems, and particularly in the three long poems studied in this chapter, truth is discovered and revealed through the poetry, which breaks the surface of the harsh and particularized realism. Poetry shows 'through rind to pith / Each object' ('With Christopher Smart', VII), or, shows 'how the soul empowers / The body to reveal its every mood' ('With Francis Furini', X). In both quotations it should be noted that the poet shows 'rind' and 'pith', 'body' and 'soul'. The external world is as much the territory of the poet as of the novelist, but the poet must also seek out the truth beneath the appearance of reality. From the quotations from the Parleyings, another point emerges: Browning is particularly interested in the relationship between body and soul, rind and pith. As was discussed earlier in this section, by standing on the 'edge of things' Browning views the whole world, rind and pith.

I argued in Chapter Two that for Browning ideal or perfect poetry would combine objective and subjective expression, and present the combination simultaneously. In Sordello (1840), he realized that 'perceptions whole' (II, 589) could not be expressed through language,

but he never ceased to strive after the ideal. In Aristophanes' Apology (1875), the 'imaginary Third' (5140) is the poet who combines the qualities of Aristophanes and Euripides, who can 'take in every side at once, / And not successively' (5142-43). Although, as is clear at the conclusion of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, Browning cannot communicate his conception as he himself experienced it (in a 'moment's flashing'), he can create a 're-presentation, in scattered rays'. In other words, he can create a process at the end of which the reader should experience something very like the poet's conception.

Although the communication cannot be instantaneous--the 'moment's flashing' must be 'amplified' and 'reduced to speech' to 'make a poem'--Browning does achieve a close approximation of his ideal of taking 'in every side at once'. In The Inn Album and Red Cotton Night-Cap Country we are aware both of the surface realism and of the underlying universal significance of the truths which the poetry explores through a rich profusion of imagery, allusion, and metaphor. We read speeches which catch the cadences of natural speech but which also, by alliteration, rhyme and rhythm, and various other devices of poetic art, reveal the deepest emotions, the soul, of the character. In The Ring and the Book, Browning calls his poetry "'an art of arts, / More insight and more outsight" (my emphasis, I, 746-47). Poetry is an art which attempts to communicate the whole vision--on the 'edge of things' 'tis the whole world which obtains regard, / Rather than any part'.

In this chapter I have tried to indicate how Browning explores poetry, and in this section I have particularly tried to suggest that part of the pleasure of Browning's poetry is the way in which he 'disports' with his art-form. His later disporting with poetry is very different from his earlier experimenting, in, say, Sordello, where it

is possible to detect a certain frustration and strain to understand his art. In Sordello the limitations of his art-form seem absolute, and attempts to go beyond these limits meet with failure (for Sordello the poet), or with only partial success (for Browning himself), and even this partial success seems due to a cautious resolve not to 'exceed his grasp' ('Andrea del Sarto', 97). He begins Sordello by admitting that he would choose to let the story reveal itself and keep himself out of view, but feels that he must settle for a safer approach (I, 11-31). With the poems which follow The Ring and the Book, Browning is very sure of his mastery of his art, and, as with all great artists, his later works in particular extend our understanding of the art itself. Is Red Cotton Night-Cap Country a success or failure? How are we to judge it?

Aspire, break bounds! I say,
 Endeavour to be good, and better still,
 And best! Success is naught, endeavour's all.

.
 For, break through Art and rise to poetry,
 Being Art to tremble nearer, touch enough
 The verge of vastness to inform our soul
 What orb makes transit through the dark above,
 And there's the triumph!--there the incomplete,
 More than completion, matches the immense.

(4017-19, 4027-32)

In The Ring and the Book, poetry is 'an art of arts' because it comprises both 'insight' and 'outsight'. Here poetry is the apex of art because it approaches completeness of vision and of communication. For Browning, poetry is an art of 'the incomplete': 'break through Art and rise to poetry, / Being Art to tremble nearer . . . / The verge of vastness'. The highest poetry, the poetry which attempts to match 'the immense', is by necessity both a success and a failure. It fails by

being incomplete; it succeeds by suggesting enough of the infinite and inexpressible 'to inform our soul' (not the intellect, or reason, which demands completion, and so 'tries the low thing, and leaves it done, at least' (4021)). This was the argument of the letter to Ruskin (discussed in Chapter Two)--'Poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite', 'I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you'. Browning believes that if the poem bears the conception from the poet to the reader it is a success.

By breaking the conventional boundaries of poetry, Browning was perfectly aware that his poems wavered between success and failure. I do not believe that, as Blougram might say, one can 'classify and be done with' such poems as The Inn Album or Red Cotton Night-Cap Country--one cannot say that they are failures or successes. The main reason for this is that they challenge the reader to think about what poetry really is, to make a personal judgment about whether to accept or reject the poem on its own merits as a poetic experience. The reader is forced to reinterpret poetry, just as poetry constantly reinterprets life--'it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned' ('Essay on Shelley', p. 67).

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

¹ See also William J. Whitla, 'Browning's Lyrics and the Language of Periodical Criticism' (1975), especially pp. 194-201. Whitla's article is in part a review essay, but it also contains interesting reflections on Browning's relation to Victorian poetics as a whole. He observes that the Victorian critics and poets explore the possibilities of genre. For example, he quotes from Hallam's review of Tennyson in 1831: 'we contend that it is a new species of poetry, a graft of the lyric on the dramatic, and Mr Tennyson deserves the laurel of an inventor'. Whitla comments: 'Arthur Hallam is making important distinctions between the traditional genres or "modes" of lyric and dramatic poetry . . . he praises Tennyson for having overcome the dichotomy between these genres' (p. 196). Browning's experiments with genre are also discussed.

² Cf. these ideas to what Ruskin writes in Modern Painters III, Pt iv, Ch 7, § 1:

We now enter on the consideration of that central and highest branch of ideal art which concerns itself simply with things as they ARE, and accepts, in all of them, alike the evil and the good.

(Works V, 111)

Ruskin, as usual, enjoys a contradiction. How can art be 'ideal' and yet concern itself simply with things as they are? His answer is not unlike Browning's and is particularly relevant to The Ring and the Book. An art fashioned from reality is ideal 'by that power of arrangement' (p. 111). 'That is to say, accepting the weaknesses, faults, and wrongnesses in all things that it sees, it so places and harmonizes them that they form a noble whole' (p. 111). Browning speaks of seeing 'the whole sight' by which what seemed 'irreconcilable' cannot now be uncombined. Ruskin's notion of artistry is really the idea of synthesis, and this idea of artistic or poetic synthesis will be considered more fully in the main text.

³ Altick and Loucks in Browning's Roman Murder Story observe that: 'The central subject, in fact, is a domestic plot of the sort which in the true epic is relegated to secondary importance and even used for comic relief' (p. 7). They also argue that the poem possesses 'attributes of several literary genre, [yet] belongs to none' (p. 7).

⁴ 'David Copperfield and Pendennis', Prospective Review, 7 (1851), 157-91 (p. 158).

⁵ George Brimley, 'Browning's Men and Women', p. 106. There are indications that in The Ring and the Book Browning attempted to meet the main objections of his critics, and in Bks I and XII there are, I believe, echoes of some of those criticisms, including, perhaps, George Brimley's.

⁶ John Morley, for example, felt that 'the action of Caponsacchi, though noble and disinterested, is hardly heroic in the highest dramatic sense, for it is not much more than the lofty defiance of

a conventionality' (rev. of The Ring and the Book, Fortnightly Review, p. 342).

7 As I pointed out in Ch III, the act of Tray is described in vocabulary similar to that used by the Pope to describe Caponsacchi's acts. The parallels between the two poems are even stronger. In The Ring and the Book, Browning speaks of 'the world come to judgment' (I, 640) and he calls the ordinary people 'those world's-bystanders' (I, 642). In 'Tray' there is a similar emphasis on judgment, and again the ordinary people are 'bystanders' who by their judgment of the events are themselves judged by the reader.

8 Pompilia's view of Caponsacchi echoes E.B.B.'s reply to Browning on 26 September 1845:

Such a proof of attachment from YOU, not only
overpowers every present evil, but seems to
me a full and abundant amends for the merely
personal sufferings of my whole life.

(Kintner I, 215-16)

Pompilia says:

through all,
The heart and its immeasurable love
Of my one friend, my only, all my own,
Who put his breast between the spears and me.
Ever with Caponsacchi! Otherwise
Here alone would be failure.

(VII, 1777-82)

9 The relation of Browning's poem to contemporary historiography has been studied in some detail in several articles. Among the most useful are those by Morse Peckham, Myron Tuman, and Roger Sharrock (listed in the Bibliography). However, I feel that this concentration on the historiography connection may be misleading. Browning seems to echo important contemporary works and debates in several disciplines in order to fuse past and present (much as he did in 'A Death in the Desert'), and also to suggest that poetry is no more false, or no less true, than any other branch of human knowledge. E.S. Dallas expresses this view in The Gay Science:

Neither in word nor in thought do we ever
reach the perfect grasp and exact rendering
of truth. All our efforts are but approx-
imations. . . . There is no more falsehood
in the fictions of art and poetry than in
those of philosophy, of religion, of history,
of law, of grammar, of mathematics.

(II, 214)

Neither Browning nor Dallas say that there is no absolute truth; what they say is that there can be no 'perfect grasp and exact rendering of truth'.

10 Cf. this to Thomas Carlyle in On Heroes:

The thoughts they had were the parents of the
actions they did; their feelings were parents
of their thoughts: it was the unseen spiritual
in them that determined the outward and actual;

--their religion, as I say, was the great fact about them.

(Works V, 3)

11 There is a strong similarity here to Coleridge who, like Ruskin, discusses the difference between imitation and poetic or artistic creation:

Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in works, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion . . . or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit.

(my emphasis, Biographia Literaria, p. 177, Ch xv)

12 There are obvious parallels between the period depicted in the poem and Browning's own age. See the examples given by Altick and Loucks in Ch X of Browning's Roman Murder Story. The poem is also a poetic exploration of some of the most important ideas of contemporary philosophers and of contemporary thinkers in general. I partly considered this in note 9, but Browning's use of Carlyle and of J.S. Mill deserves special mention. Some of the central ideas of The Ring and the Book bear a striking resemblance to those expressed in some of their works. For example, in On Liberty, J.S. Mill writes:

Popular opinions . . . are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth. They are a part of the truth.

(p. 83)

Cf. this to The Ring and the Book, Bks II-IV. Mill also says:

When the mind is no longer compelled . . . to exercise its vital powers on the questions which its belief presents to it, there is a progressive tendency to forget all of the belief except the formularies, or to give it a dull and torpid assent, as if accepting it on trust dispensed with the necessity of realizing it in consciousness, or testing it by personal experience; until it almost ceases to connect itself at all with the inner life of the human being.

(p. 73)

Cf. this to Browning's Pope on the need to 'shake/This torpor of assurance from our creed' (X, 1853-54), and, 'Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report' (X, 1866).

Some of the ideas in Carlyle's Past and Present and 'On History' also seem remarkably similar to those explored by Browning in his poem. The central idea of The Ring and the Book seems to be anticipated by Carlyle in 'On History'--following his observations on the 'conflict of testimonies', he says: 'Suppose, however, that the majority of votes was all wrong; that the real cardinal points lay far deeper: and had been passed over unnoticed, because no Seer, but only mere Onlookers, chanced to be there!' (Works XXVII, 88). He goes on: 'The Experience itself would require All-knowledge to record it. . . . Better were it that mere earthly Historians

should lower such pretensions, more suitable for Omniscience than for human science; and aiming only at some picture of the things acted' (Ibid., p. 89). Browning says, 'Let this old woe step on the stage again! / Act itself o'er anew' (I, 824-25). Yet Browning, as a Seer, goes beyond the Historian's craft of 'aiming only at some picture of the things acted'; through poetry he does provide 'All-knowledge' and does reproduce a kind of 'Experience itself' (but only within the context of the poem).

13 These words are echoed ironically in Guido's first monologue. He claims that he did 'God's bidding and man's duty' (V, 1703), and says that he felt the 'impulse' to 'Declare to the world the one law, right is right' (V, 1578).

14 Guido, of course, chooses to 'live brutishly, obey brutes' law', and makes this choice after Christ's birth. Euripides compares his age, 'midnight' (X, 1781), with Guido's, when men now walk 'in the blaze of noon' (X, 1784). Guido's choice, therefore, is all the more damnable because he also denies man's moral and spiritual progress. Guido in fact bears a strong resemblance to that other 'primitive religionist', Caliban. Guido says,

You favour one,
Brow-beat another, leave alone a third.
(XI, 1435-36)

and,

When the sky darkens, Jove is wroth,--say prayer!
(XI, 1950)

Caliban, on similar themes, says:

'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.
(102-03)

and,

His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him!
Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
(291-92)

15 Cf. Don Celestine's view of the Pope:

'What I call God's hand,--you, perhaps,--this chance
Of the true instinct of an old good man.'
(XII, 592-93)

16 Cf. Don Celestine's view of the Pope:

'In whom too was the eye that saw, not dim,
The natural force to do the thing he saw,
Nowise abated,--both by miracle.'
(XII, 595-97)

Browning implies that God's miracles are achieved through 'natural force': they are not supernatural. Caponsacchi's view that God can save Pompilia 'by one miracle the more, / Without me', is a failure to recognize that he is the instrument of God's miracle, a failure to perform his duty to God.

17 It is interesting to compare these ideas to what Pater writes in his essay on Coleridge:

What the moralist asks is, Shall we gain or
lose by surrendering human life to the relative
spirit? Experience answers that the dominant

tendency of life is to turn ascertained truth into a dead letter, to make us all the phlegmatic servants of routine. The relative spirit, by its constant dwelling on the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things, breaking through a thousand rough and brutal classifications, and giving elasticity to inflexible principles, begets an intellectual finesse, of which the ethical result is a delicate and tender justness in the criticism of human life.

(Appreciations, 1889, pp. 104-05)

The first half of this quotation has an obvious relation to The Ring and the Book, and to J.S. Mill's On Liberty (see note 12). But by comparing the second half of the quotation with Browning's ideas one can see how far from being a relativist's poem The Ring and the Book is. Browning advocates a return to, or continuation of, the essential truth. Like Pater, he rejects 'rough and brutal classifications', but he does not believe that truth is relative, that it differs from man to man, age to age. Truth is constant, it is man's perception of truth which undergoes change and variation. Pater's 'intellectual finesse' would have to allow Guido's view of life equal rank with the Pope's, since it is a view which certainly takes into account 'the more fugitive conditions or circumstances of things'. Browning's point is that Guido's view of life is false, and it can be seen as false because there is an absolute standard or truth of human life.

18 'The Novel in The Ring and the Book', p. 75.

19 This difficulty is discussed by Donald S. Hair in 'Exploring Asolando' (1978). He considers the 'ambiguities' in the lines:

A Voice spoke thence which straight unlinked
Fancy from fact: see, all's in ken:
Has once my eyelid winked?

(38-40)

'What is fancy, and what is fact, in these particular lines? If they had appeared earlier in the poem, fancy would clearly be the action of the mind in draping natural objects in images, and fact would be the 'naked very thing'. But here the terms seem to have shifted in meaning. The fact which the Voice affirms is the divinity dwelling within natural objects, while fancy may now be the kind of ordinary perception which knows and names natural objects but fails to understand their true nature' (p. 6).

20 Although in the letter Browning says he is discussing the dramatic poet, the remarks seem to apply to Browning's ideas about poets in general. In 'Transcendentalism', discussed earlier, there is much the same distinction between poets who make 'things' and writers in prose (and bad poets) who use 'dry words'.

21 Quoted by Maisie Ward, Robert Browning and His World, II, 152.

22 Ashby B. Crowder's 'But Ah, the Form, Ye Gods, the Unneglected Form' (1976) is a valuable study of how Browning uses the poetry to convey the sense of the poem. The article provides several examples and studies, other than the ones I offer, of Browning's poetic craftsmanship.

23 Cf. The Ring and the Book:
 our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 And human estimation words and wind.
 (XII, 834-36)

24 By 'thought' Browning here means what in Chapter Two I understood by the word 'conception'. He does not mean the purely rational or logical deduction. In Sordello 'thought' (in the sense of the product of the reasoning faculty) is contrasted with 'perception' (that is, the poet's vision, or conception). While language is presented as being the tool of thought, it rejects 'perceptions whole' (see II, 588-95).

Chapter Five

CONCLUSIONS

The poet must be trusted to judge of the capacity of his theme, and that it is his conception and treatment of it which ultimately justify or discredit his choice.

John Morley, on The Ring and the Book, Fortnightly Review, N.S. 5 (1869), 331-43 (p. 331)

Morley's conclusion, drawn from Browning's 'conception and treatment' of the facts of the old Roman murder trial, demonstrates the centrality of Browning to the Victorian subject-matter debate. As I argued in the previous chapter, the subject of Browning's epic, The Ring and the Book, challenges not only the idea that there is a specific subject-matter for poetry, but also the whole notion of a stable practice of poetry with boundaries and regulative laws.

In a letter of 7 March 1846, E.B.B. wrote that each art 'has the seal of the age, modifying itself after a fashion. . . . all the Arts are mediators between the soul & the Infinite, . . . shifting always like a mist, between the Breath on this side, & the Light on that side' (Kintner I, 526). In a letter to E.B.B. of 31 January 1846, Browning observes 'how the fashion of this world passes; the forms its beauty & truth take' (Kintner I, 429). In both letters art is regarded as constantly 'modifying itself' to express man's changing perception of beauty and truth. The word 'fashion' is used by E.B.B. to mean that which is in accord with the age, in accord with what Arnold might call

its 'current of ideas'. E.B.B. describes the Arts as being 'like a mist'. The art-forms, including poetry, are seen as being indefinable and variable, altering their forms to mediate between man and the 'Infinite', according to man's understanding of the 'Infinite' at that particular time.

Throughout the Victorian period this process of the modification of the arts is very much in evidence, and it is particularly evident in poetry, or, to be more specific, in ideas about what poetry is or should be. Despite the variety of poetic theories in the Victorian period, by the mid-century the 'fashion' or 'seal of the age' is quite distinct upon poetry, and it is possible to speak of a Victorian poetics with as much conviction as one can speak of the character or orientation of the poetics of any period. Yet an understanding and acceptance of Victorian poetic theory has been extremely slow to emerge. Michael Timko in 'The Victorianism of Victorian Literature' (1975) writes:

It is a tribute to criticism published during the last decade that the Victorians are in danger of losing their identity and becoming 'mid-nineteenth century' or 'premodern'. In reaction perhaps to the stigma that the term carried, literary historians and critics have attempted to demonstrate the 'un-Victorian' characteristics of the age. (p. 607)

Timko's article makes a good case for a recognition of a distinct 'Victorianism', but surely the necessity to make a good case for such an argument is strange?

Critics attempting a sympathetic approach to Victorian theory tend to be defensive or apologetic. For example, W.D. Shaw opens The Dialectical Temper (1968) in the following manner:

[The reader] may feel that many of Browning's Victorian attitudes are now out of date. We should remember, however, that a thinker does not have to reflect our own beliefs in order to have significance for us. . . . Browning's modernity lies in his dialectical method.
(p. 4)

The last sentence seems to say that even if Browning's matter or content is 'Victorian' and 'now out of date', his 'method' is modern and hence worth looking at. I discussed Peter Allan Dale's The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History (1977) in Chapter One, and pointed out that the assumption which underlies the study precludes any real understanding of Victorian poetics. This assumption is that art should only be viewed from a purely aesthetic perspective, any wider perspective must be an aberration which will compound and confuse art with life. Dale redeems Victorian poetic theory by finding in 'the historicist outlook' some sort of subversive undercurrent which eventually forced criticism back on the right track. He writes:

By undermining the concept of belief itself the historicist outlook at the same time undermined the ancient assumption that poetry is a variety of truth or knowledge, closer to philosophy than to history. In this its tendency was ever to compel critical attention back upon more specifically aesthetic criteria for the discussion of art and to liberate art from subservience to criteria more suitably applied elsewhere. (p. 255)

Both Shaw and Dale, despite the indisputable merits of their studies, show signs of a prevalent critical attitude, an attitude which is most strongly marked in the 'revaluations' of Victorian poetry by such eminent poets and critics as Yeats and Eliot, Richards and Leavis.

The strongest characteristics and consequences of this attitude can be summarized as follows. First, there is a stubborn disinclination to accept Victorian poetics on its own terms as 'the fashion of this world'

at that particular time. Secondly, there is a tendency to attempt to appreciate Victorian poetics by modern aesthetic criteria. Finally, an obvious result of the first two tendencies, is that Victorian poetics seems confused and unrewarding: it refuses to narrow itself to 'specifically aesthetic criteria' and remains subservient to 'criteria more suitably applied elsewhere'. Victorian poetry is adjudged to be full of 'impurities'.

It is those so-called 'impurities' which suggest the central feature of Victorian poetry and poetic theory: a refusal to regard the poem as an autonomous self-contained entity. The poem, or more generally, poetry as an art-form, has a relation to life and an effect on life. In his essay 'Wordsworth' (1879), Arnold says 'that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life,--to the question: How to live' (CPW IX, 46). It is this concept of poetry as a 'criticism of life' which I regard as the leading characteristic of Victorian poetics.

The variety and inconsistencies in Victorian poetry and poetic theory should not be dismissed as mere confusion. It is probable that this sense of confusion is largely due to the tremendous amount of material which must be sifted before one can really grasp the main directions and characteristics of the period. In particular, I believe that Victorian poetic theory will become much clearer once the importance of periodical criticism has been more fully assessed. Here I shall draw attention only to those aspects of periodical criticism which seem particularly relevant to this study.

Even the narrowest acquaintance with Victorian periodicals makes one aware of the immense range of the subject-matter of their articles. The most heterogeneous of subjects are gathered together, and yet many

of the articles seem remarkably specialized for the average reader. Very few of the articles, however, require a knowledge of any specialized vocabulary. Isobel Armstrong in Victorian Scrutinies (1972) notes an 'almost complete absence of a specialized or technical critical vocabulary in Victorian reviewing, a vocabulary capable of describing the formal or aesthetic qualities of a poem' (p. 5). But this, I feel, should be regarded not as a weakness, but as part of the wider critical perspective which I discussed in Chapter One. This perspective is obviously linked to the main vehicle of Victorian reviewing--the periodical. By placing poetry and poetic criticism in magazines with a broad range of interests, and by discussing literature in everyday language, the relation of poetry to life becomes of central importance. Poetry and poetic theory are made part of 'the current of ideas': they are part of the general intellectual and cultural developments in the age.

The importance of the periodical as the vehicle of Victorian criticism helps to explain those 'flaws' of inconsistency and impurity in Victorian poetics. The periodical, or more generally, the press,¹ stimulated debates on certain topics relating to poetry. By this I mean that an article or review could begin a debate on a particular aspect of poetry, while a later article might move the focus of that debate to quite a different aspect. For example, earlier I pointed out that what seem to be major changes of direction in Arnold's poetic outlook could rather be regarded as shifts of emphasis to concentrate attention on the main topic of debate at the time. Sidney Coulling in Matthew Arnold and His Critics (1974) places the Preface of 1853 in the context of contemporary periodical criticism and notes that the Preface of 1854 answers some of the objections to the earlier preface. In other words, these prefaces are, in large part, reactions to poetic debates in

contemporary periodicals. While maintaining that he still believes his original preface 'to be, in the main, true', Arnold is willing to clarify or modify his views in his Preface of 1854 to present a counter argument to further criticisms of his poetics.

A brief study of periodical criticism in the nineteenth century reveals recurrent themes and points of interest which suggest a relatively coherent theory of poetry, or which at least form a pattern indicating the orientation of Victorian poetic thought. The reviews of Tennyson's Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830) by Fox and Hallam introduce themes which dominate Victorian criticism throughout the period--both particularly concentrate on the subject-matter of poetry, and both attempt to assess the direction poetry ought to take, or is taking, in the age. Hallam's 'On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson' is a remarkable article which anticipates much of Arnold's Preface. Fox's emphasis on psychological subject-matter foreshadows Forman's review of The Ring and the Book. However, the arguments in these later articles show a clear progression--while, for example, Fox looks to the future and attempts to argue against the pessimistic outlook for poetry prophesied by such as Hazlitt, Peacock, and Macaulay, Forman looks back to recognize the founders of 'schools of poetry' who have established the main course of modern poetry. The crucial step in attempting to discern a distinct Victorian poetic theory is to accept that this theory is not static or fully revealed in any one essay by any one poet or critic, it must be recognized as developing throughout the period in the form of continuing debates.²

It is by studying Browning's poetry in the context of these debates, and particularly, of course, in the context of the central subject-matter debate, that one begins to appreciate how much Browning himself is part

of the main movement of Victorian poetical thought. Throughout this study I have indicated how Browning demonstrates his awareness of the criticisms levelled against poetry in the period, and how he attempts to meet those criticisms by reinterpreting poetry, and evolving a theory of poetry of which the central tenet is constant development and change to maintain the essential correspondence between poetry and man's progression towards a full understanding of truth. This idea lies at the heart of the 'Essay on Shelley'. As I argued in Chapter One, the 'Essay' is concerned with the poetry of his own age. He twice draws attention to the fact that he is using current critical vocabulary--'an objective poet, as the phrase now goes' (p. 63), 'the subjective poet of modern classification' (p. 65)--and he wrote to Carlyle that he had used some of his ideas. This relationship between Browning's poetic thought and the thought of the age extends to his poetry, and to the poetic theory contained within his poetry.

While it is generally true that there is an 'almost complete absence of a specialized or technical critical vocabulary in Victorian reviewing', there are words, images, and similes which tend to recur and to do the work of a more precise critical vocabulary. I have already pointed out the resemblance of the ring metaphor in The Ring and the Book to George Brimley's use of 'rough ore' and 'prosaic dross' in his review of Men and Women, and to Aubrey De Vere's belief that 'the humble truth of literal fact is the alloy, which only debases the ideal truth of poetry to make it malleable' (Edinburgh Review, 1849). Browning often compares himself to Moses. In Sordello, for example, he portrays himself as a 'Metaphysic Poet' and says:

awkwardly enough your Moses smites
The rock, though he forego his Promised Land.
(III, 826-27)

In the conclusion to 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864), Arnold also depicts himself as Moses and his period as the period of the wandering in the wilderness.

The absence of a specialized critical language allows Browning to make poetic criticism a subject of his poetry. In Chapter Two I demonstrated that he uses certain metaphors and images several times to communicate what he understands by poetic language and prosaic language. He very frequently uses pure white light as a metaphor for truth and coloured light for the imperfect human vision of truth. These poetic images and metaphors do not create a purely self-referential poetic theory. As the ring metaphor shows, very similar poetic metaphors and images were used in periodical prose criticism to describe poetic techniques and effects. It is not necessarily true, then, that because the Victorians did not create a 'technical critical vocabulary', they were incapable of 'describing the formal or aesthetic qualities of a poem'. In many ways the often extremely complex language of modern criticism comes no closer to an accurate description of the aesthetic qualities of a poem than the critical-poetic language of the Victorians.

The wide perspective of Victorian poetics and its non-specialized vocabulary should be seen as positive qualities. The great ideal of Victorian poetic theory is that poetry should have a recognized and important place in human life. Arnold gives this ideal a rather more didactic or pragmatic aspect in his statement that modern poetry must become a 'magister vitae'. Yet it is important to observe Arnold's constant concern for the aesthetic qualities of poetry, and a major part of my argument has been to emphasize that the Victorians sought to unite aesthetic and pragmatic aims in poetry.

I have attempted to argue that above all it is Browning who achieves

this union, and that he does so quite consciously, emphasizing throughout his career his desire to combine subjective and objective poetry, tragedy and comedy, 'the false and true, / The dream and the reality' ('Jochanan Hakkadosh', 752-53).³ In Browning's poetry this reconciliation is most often achieved by a new vision, or a more complete vision (for example, 'Jochanan Hakkadosh', 748-51), and it is basically this idea which he applies to poetry itself. The quotations from the Brownings' letters which opened this chapter show that poetry is regarded as constantly modifying itself to 'the forms . . . beauty & truth take' in each age. Browning stresses this process of modification in his 'Essay on Shelley', and, indeed, throughout his poetry. Browning, then, looks afresh at poetry, just as he believes poetry must look afresh at the world.

In Browning's reinterpretation of poetry the processes of analysis and discovery become as much a part of the pleasure of the poem as the final synthesis. Arnold and Austin both associate analysis with philosophy, or more generally, with criticism, and both refuse to accept that poetry should contain this process of analysis. Yet it is Browning's inclusion of analysis in his poetry which allows him to make poetry a 'magister vitae', a poetry capable of dealing with all subjects and not just those which have become traditionally poetic. Browning himself answers

the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value, careless of the unknown laws for recombining them (it will be the business of yet another poet to suggest those hereafter), prodigal of objects for men's outer and not inner sight, shaping for their uses a new and different

creation from the last . . . to endure until . . . its very sufficiency to itself shall require, at length, an exposition of its affinity to something higher,--when the positive yet conflicting facts shall again precipitate themselves under a harmonising law, and one more degree will be apparent for a poet to climb in that mighty ladder, of which, however cloud-involved and undefined may glimmer the topmost step, the world dares no longer doubt that its gradations ascend. (p. 68)

I have quoted from the 'Essay on Shelley' at length because here Browning describes his vision of the development of poetry. This development operates through cycles of subjective and objective poetry. What is of especial interest is that the objective poet seems to be primarily an analyst, while the subjective poet is primarily a synthesist. The objective poet takes raw life ('the fresh and living swathe'), 'getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value'. The subjective poet presents 'an exposition of [the affinity of these parts] to something higher' and places them 'under a harmonising law'. Browning's description of the subjective poet is close to Arnold's view that 'the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition', and that a poet must begin with an 'Idea of the world'.

The last part of this passage is of particular importance in that it strongly resembles a passage in the 'Parleying with Francis Furini', in which Browning speaks in his own voice.

Well, my attempt to make the cloud disperse
 Begins--not from above but underneath:
 I climb, you soar,--who soars soon loses breath
 And sinks, who climbs keeps one foot firm on fact
 Ere hazarding the next step.

(X)

In both passages Browning uses the images of clouds, steps, and the idea of man's gradual ascent. As in the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning

is considering the progress of man towards an understanding of truth, and again as in the 'Essay', he recognizes two means of perceiving and revealing truth--'truth I glimpse from depths, you glance from heights' (IX). In the 'Essay' the subjective poet aims for 'an ultimate view. . . . Not what man sees, but what God sees' (p. 65). He is 'the poet of loftier vision' (p. 68).

It may appear that in the passage from the 'Essay on Shelley' Browning has classified himself as an objective poet of analysis. However, the latter part of this passage clearly depicts the work of the subjective poet, the synthesist, and yet it also clearly foreshadows Browning's description of his own work in the 'Parleying with Francis Furini'. In my reading of Browning's poetic theory Browning attempts to combine both poetic faculties, to become, as he said in the headings to Sordello (Book V), the 'analyst, who turns in due course synthetist'. In the 'Furini' passage the union of subjective and objective faculties is achieved, as in Sordello, by analysis followed by synthesis--'Only by looking low, ere looking high, / Comes penetration of the mystery' (X). This is the means of attaining 'the next step' ('Furini') towards 'the topmost step' ('Essay').

Unlike the pure subjective poet he does not 'soar' but 'keeps one foot firm on fact'. It is through the process of analysing this world, the world of factual reality, that Browning attempts 'to make the cloud disperse', to present us with some clearer higher vision. In Aristophanes' Apology, Browning again uses a sky metaphor for the poet's higher vision. Euripides says that he inclines "'to poetize philosophy"' (2115), and "'Having thus drawn sky earthwards, what comes next / But dare the opposite, lift earth to sky"' (2121-22). Here Browning quite specifically argues against Arnold's sharp distinction between the work

of literature and the work of philosophy. By combining objective and subjective poetic modes, or analysis and synthesis, Browning creates a poetry which is capable of dealing with any subject, and which can truly be a 'magister vitae' to take man closer to the 'penetration of the mystery'.

In the last chapter, The Ring and the Book, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, and The Inn Album were used to demonstrate how Browning undertakes a complete reinterpretation of poetry, reviewing the boundaries of poetic genre, subject-matter, and language, in order to achieve a subjective-objective union. In each of these poems he creates directly from factual material, and the final synthesis is only reached after a process of analysis and discovery. The comments of Alfred Austin and Henry James show that some critics felt that Browning had gone beyond what could be accepted as poetry. Yet this view was obviously anticipated by Browning. Aristophanes in Aristophanes' Apology accuses Euripides of spoiling his art in order to poetize his precious system (2176-77). Euripides' defence centres on what is indisputably Browning's main poetic concept--the essential bond between the development of man and the development of poetry.

Browning's concept of poetic development solves many of the problems facing poetry in his era. In a revealing letter of 17 May 1846 he writes:

The cant is, that 'an age of transition' is the melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate--whereas the worst things of all to look back on are times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness. . . . The other day I took up a book two centuries old in which 'glory', 'soldiering', 'rushing to conquer', and the rest, were most thoroughly 'believed in'--and if by some miracle the writer had conceived and described some unbeliever, unable to 'rush to conquer the Parthians' &c, it would have been as tho' you found a green bough inside a truss of straw. (Kintner II, 710)

This letter was in reply to one from E.B.B. of 16 May 1846 about whether 'genius in the arts is a mere reflection of the character of the times'. There are several points of interest in Browning's reply. First, he accepts, and does not lament, that his age is 'an age of transition'. Secondly, and of especial importance, is his condemnation of periods which achieve and attempt to maintain a perfection or 'impotent completeness'. Thirdly, the final sentence is similar to his comparison of 'the straw of last year's harvest' with 'a supply of the fresh and living swathe' in the 'Essay on Shelley'. Although in the quotation from the letter it may seem somewhat paradoxical that the 'green bough' is in fact a passive unbeliever, while the 'straw' represents those who are active and full of conviction, Browning's argument is clear enough. Activity in itself is no measure of progress. Forman, in his article on The Ring and the Book, stated that it is a 'false notion that "heroic" is a term applicable only to wars and large actions' (p. 357). For Browning, progression involves a constant testing of beliefs. Browning's hero is most often the individual who decides for himself and does not blindly follow the conventions or rules of his time.

In 'Characteristics' Carlyle stated that in his period 'our being is made up of Light and Darkness, the Light resting on the Darkness, and balancing it; everywhere there is Dualism, Equipoise; a perpetual Contradiction dwells in us' (Works XVIII, 27). Earlier I observed that Carlyle does not so much describe confusion, as a state of continual debate, of thesis and antithesis. In Browning's letter it is exactly this state which he approves, and which for him is the sign of progress. In his 'book two centuries old', what he looks for is the antithetical force which will challenge the doctrines 'most thoroughly "believed in"', because of this, it is ironically the passive 'unbeliever' who is the

'green bough inside a truss of straw'. In The Ring and the Book Caponsacchi acts the part of Browning's idea of an 'unbeliever'. The Pope describes Caponsacchi as

the first experimentalist
 In the new order of things,--he plays a priest;
 Does he take inspiration from the Church,
 Directly make her rule his law of life?
 Not he: his own mere impulse guides the man.
 (X, 1909-13)

Caponsacchi is balanced by the Abate and Guido whose hearts answer to another tune (1929), and whose impulses are selfish and conducive to moral and social retrogression.

The historical situation which Browning depicts in The Ring and the Book is very like the picture of the early nineteenth century which Carlyle presents in 'Characteristics'--a time of 'Inquiry', 'Doubt'; of 'Change, or the inevitable approach of Change'. As I argued earlier, this disturbing instability is accepted by Browning as the necessary force of development. The Pope puts this most succinctly:

what whispers me of times to come?
 What if it be the mission of that age,
 My death will usher into life, to shake
 This torpor of assurance from our creed,
 Re-introduce the doubt discarded

 As we broke up that old faith of the world,
 Have we, next age, to break up this the new--
 Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report--
 Whence need to bravely disbelieve report
 Through increased faith in thing reports belie?
 (X, 1850-54, 1863-67)

Compare the first two lines of the second quotation with the quotation on development from the 'Essay on Shelley'--'getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassified

value'. 'Faith, in the thing' is obviously like Browning's insistence on the necessity of poetry to maintain its basis in 'this world'.

The Pope sees the purpose of this progress as being to 'Correct the portrait by the living face, / Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man' (1872-73). In Aristophanes' Apology poetry is compared to a stone block, and the poet is the sculptor who shapes the block into a sign which will be intelligible to his age. Browning describes the differences between the 'old-world artist' and the modern artist:

Both find a block: this man carves back to bull
 What first his predecessor cut to sphinx:
 Such genuine actual roarer, nature's brute,
 Intelligible to our time, was sure
 The old-world artist's purpose, had he worked
 To mind; this both means and makes the thing!
 (2202-07)

In both quotations Browning connects the development of art (the correction of a portrait, the carving of a sculpture) with man's perception of the truth. The development in both cases is brought about by a closer contact with, and deeper understanding of, reality.

In my view, Browning regarded his period as one which required a mainly objective mode of poetry, a poetry which would firmly re-establish the relationship between poetry and real life. This explains his obsession with factual material and with subjects closely connected to the interests and character of his own age. Nevertheless, it is also clear that he sought to achieve the union of subjective and objective expression, to bring poetry one step nearer perfection. To do this, Browning saw the need for a complete reinterpretation of poetry. Although I have emphasized Browning's relationship to the poetical thought of his age, he is remarkable, if not unique, in the coherence of his poetic views. This is achieved not only by his acceptance of change as a

necessary fact of development, but also by his vision of poetry itself as something which is shaped by the poet and by the progressive understanding of mankind. Browning does not regard poetry as something with fixed rules and boundaries, and hence he completely rejects the idea of an 'unpoetical age', the sense of which so disturbed Arnold.

Browning uses the turbulence, the 'perpetual Contradiction', of his period to suggest an interpretation of poetry which succeeds in uniting subjective and objective modes of poetic expression, and also succeeds in achieving the Victorian ideal of a 'magister vitae': a poetry which is capable of being intellectually and spiritually meaningful in every area of life. Although many Victorians elevate poetry above all the other arts, and above all other disciplines and forms of knowledge, they are extremely vague as to the reasons for this elevation. In most cases there is some allusion to poetry's powers of synthesis. Poetry is regarded as that which can reunite the fragments of man's knowledge into some coherent explanation of life. Browning, however, is exceptional in his more precise realisation of the importance of poetry to the age. He is certainly unique in reinterpreting and renovating poetry to allow it to achieve such a position of importance.

In the quotations from The Ring and the Book and Aristophanes' Apology occur the rather similar lines: 'Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report' and 'both means and makes the thing'. In the 'Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville' Browning says, 'Look through the sign to the thing signified' (VII). The crucial point of these lines is the emphasis which is put on the receiver of the communication experiencing the thing itself and not simply having to accept 'the report' or 'the sign'. This overcomes the problem of the seemingly unbridgable gap between subjective and objective communication. It also

overcomes the main objections to poetic language and poetic truth.

In the 'Parleying with Bernard de Mandeville' Browning condemns the

mortal purblind way
Of seeking in the symbol no mere point
To guide our gaze through what were else inane,
But things--their solid selves.

(VII)

Earlier in this thesis I argued that Browning differentiates between poetic language and prose by suggesting that poetic language is transparent while prose is opaque and solid. Poetic language is not really part of the normal structure of grammar, but is used by the poet, in the context of the poem, to create that which will suggest the thing itself. Words are used 'to guide our gaze through what were else inane' to 'things--their solid selves'. At times Browning quite deliberately breaks with normal syntax in order to create the very sense of what he is trying to express. In Sordello Browning realized that he cannot communicate 'perceptions whole'. Later in his career he uses this inability to achieve a total and instant communication to further the development of poetry. Poetic language, indeed the whole of the poem, becomes a process which the reader must share in order to achieve the poetic synthesis. The poem becomes more than a communication, it becomes an experience.

In Sordello it is obvious that Browning is feeling his way towards a theory of poetry. One idea is particularly conspicuous: Browning's interest in fragments or process, rather than in what is whole and complete.

we watch construct,
In short, an engine: with a finished one,
What it can do, is all,--naught, how 'tis done.
(III, 840-42)

The failure of Sordello is Browning's inability to achieve a synthesis, and the reason for this becomes clear as the poem progresses. The kind of poetry Browning wishes to create requires the reader to share and complete the process towards the synthesis. But with Sordello Browning is as yet unsure of the reader's ability to see for himself. The poem opens on Browning's uncertainty of how to communicate his conception of the story. This uncertainty frustrates both Browning and the reader. At times Browning stands with pointing-pole in hand and chalks 'broadly on each [character's] vesture's hem' (I, 28) what we are to make of that character, at other times he makes speak 'the very man as he was wont to do, / And [leaves the reader] to say the rest for him' (I, 16-17). With The Ring and the Book there is no such uncertainty:

The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves.
(I, 1363-64)

Browning firmly shifts the orientation of his poetic theory from the poet to the poem. For Browning, the poet is not a man speaking to other men, as Wordsworth believed. In the conclusion to The Ring and the Book, Browning specifically says that in art 'man nowise speaks to men' (XII, 854). Yet poetry is still unquestionably a communication; the crucial difference is that it is an oblique communication, the poem and not the poet is the instrument of 'telling truth'.

In Modern Painters III (1856), Ruskin wrote:

The elements of progress and decline being thus strangely mingled in the modern mind, we might before-hand anticipate that one of the notable characters of our art would be its inconsistency; that effects would be made in every direction, and arrested by every conceivable cause and manner of failure; that in all we did, it would become next to impossible to distinguish accurately the grounds for praise or for regret; that all previous canons of

practice and methods of thought would be gradually overthrown, and criticism continually defied by successes which no one had expected, and sentiments which no one could define.

(Pt iv, Ch 16, § 17. Works V, 327)

It is important to recognize that Victorian poetry and poetic theory explore rather than define 'canons of practice and methods of thought'. Inconsistency, diversity, false starts, vagueness--Ruskin quite accurately pin-points the irritating characteristics of Victorian poetic theory. But these characteristics are irritating only if we approach the Victorian age with preconceived ideas of what we expect poetry to be like.

The great virtue of Victorian poetics is its wide perspective: poetry is put firmly into the context of life and is discussed in everyday language. The debate about subject-matter, as Swinburne realized, was really a debate about 'the end and aim of art'. But in fact the debate ranged even wider. By creating poetry from material which could not be regarded as in any way poetic, Browning brought to the fore the whole question of what poetry is, and indeed of what art is.

The Ring and the Book asks the reader to consider what constitutes an epic experience if, as Browning demonstrates, this experience can be achieved even by breaking most of the conventions and traditions of epic. In particular, as most readers realized, the effect of the poem is not at all dependent upon the poet's choice of subject. Browning also demonstrates that the relevance of the poem to the life of the times is not necessarily connected to the topicality of the subject. The Ring and the Book is arguably more specifically related to the Victorian age (see Ch IV, Note 12) than The Inn Album which carries

allusions to events which occurred only days before the composition of the poem. In Browning's view, the modernity of poetry is determined by the way in which the poet reveals and interprets truth, and in this the development of poetry is integrally related to the developing understanding of mankind.

Browning's study of what poetry is, is compounded with his study of what life is. As with Arnold, and most of the Victorian critics, Browning accepts that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life. But it is a mistake to think that because poetry is not examined from a narrow perspective that the examination is by necessity shallow. Browning's debate with Arnold ranges extremely widely, but it also considers every technical aspect of poetry. The dominant question is always, 'What is the essence of poetry?' Browning never considers that poetry can only be found in poetic subjects. He also discovers that poetry does not reside in the words themselves as individual signs with understood meanings--a literal translation cannot produce the poetic effect of the original. Poetry is, for Browning, the communication to the reader of the poet's conception. The poem is an organic whole which creates an experience for the reader which brings him close to the realization of the poet's original conception of his subject or insight into his subject.

Poetry itself is without rules and boundaries: it is defined by each successful poem. Asolando is a remarkable volume which continues to 'disport' with poetics. It is with this last volume that one truly appreciates Browning's poetry and Victorian poetics as a whole. Ruskin's remarks can be fairly applied to Browning's works, but the proper tone of what he says can only be gauged by applying his words to Asolando--Browning's 'disporting' with poetry. The variety of the poems, the range of their subjects, the complexity of ideas (often disguised in

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1 For example, in the Preface to the First Edition of Modern Painters (1843), Ruskin states that he felt compelled to write his work because 'public taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day, and . . . the press universally exerts such power as it possesses to direct the feelings of the nation more completely to all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art' (Works III, 4). Ruskin's highly influential Modern Painters is therefore, partly stimulated by 'the press', and is a contribution to the contemporary artistic and cultural debates promoted mainly by the periodicals.

2 In 'L'Année Terrible' (1872), Swinburne says that 'the question whether past or present afford the highest matter for high poetry . . . has been . . . loudly and . . . long debated' (Works XIII, 246). In 1872, then, Swinburne takes up the central issue of the subject-matter debate, fully recognizing that he is contributing to something 'long debated'. By comparing Swinburne's essay with Arnold's Preface of 1853 one can see how much the debate has developed and clarified its points of contention. By looking even further back, to Hallam's review of Tennyson's poetry in 1831, the essential continuity of the debates is clear.

3 The titles of several of Browning's volumes demonstrate this. Dramatic Lyrics (1842) combines the traditional forms of poetry associated with the objective and subjective poets. The strange title, Bells and Pomegranates was for Browning 'symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the Gay & the Grave, the Poetry & the Prose, Singing and Sermonizing' (Kintner I, 241. 18 October 1845). The subtitle of Asolando, Fancies and Facts (1889) again reveals this interest in the reconciliation of opposites.

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