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**A POET'S SELF-OBSERVATION:
ROBERT BROWNING'S POEMS *IN PROPRIA PERSONA***

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ABSTRACT

Robert Browning's poems *in propria persona* are usually considered as giving access to his poetics and private self. The contention of this thesis is that many of these poems do not seriously disclose the poet's personality but partially subvert the reliability of their speaker. Three hypotheses are posited. Firstly, as in the dramatic monologue, there is a distance between the implied author and the speaker, which allows the reader more critically to observe how the speaker 'Browning' conceptualises his self and his world. To analyse this differentiation, the thesis draws on a critical approach which combines Antony Easthope's distinction of *enounced* and *enunciation* and Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory of *second order observation*. Secondly, Browning's self-portrayal is shown often to be the opportunity for a critical scrutiny of the way the public perceives him and evaluates poetry in general. The poems thus incite the reader to an observation of his own aesthetic criteria which parallels the poet's reflections on the poetic medium. Thirdly, discussing poetics within the literary text is seen to be Browning's contribution to the self-generating autonomy of the modern art system as Luhmann defines it. The poems which undermine the statements of the speaker are related to Romantic Irony, which is a prime indicator of the transition to a modern concept of literature.

The thesis undertakes critical readings of those poems *in propria persona* which focus on Browning's identity as a poet with an emphasis on the various techniques he employs in presenting himself. Chapters cover his self-definition in relation to the self-expressive poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poems in which he presents himself as the object of observation by others, poems responding directly to his critics, his self-presentation as the narrator in the narrative poems, and his dialectical self-definition in relation to other poets or poetic concepts. The poems emerge as documents of Browning's hesitant transition towards a modern concept of poetry as independent of extra-literary functions and of the poet's personality.

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Part of Chapter V.1.4 of this thesis appeared in *Notes and Queries*, and Chapter V.2 is a revised version of sections from my MA thesis (see Works Cited). I thank Dr. Mairi Rennie for the permission to quote from her unpublished doctoral dissertation and the Armstrong Browning Library in Waco, Texas, for the permission to reproduce their copy of Guercino's *Angelo Custode*.

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A NOTE ON TEXTS

Three major critical editions of Browning's work by Ohio University Press, Oxford University Press and Longman are still in progress. Only the much shorter two-volume Penguin edition covers all of his poetical works, with the exception of the translation of the *Agamemnon* (1877). This edition is defective both in what it includes among Browning's unpublished or uncollected poems and in what it omits, e.g. it mistakenly ascribes poems by EBB to Browning and vice versa.

In order to be able to trace the chronological development of Browning's self-conceptualisation, I would have liked to use as my primary reference his works as they appear in their first editions. In the absence of a complete critical edition of all first editions and in view of the fact that Browning's textual revisions of works written after his marriage in 1846 are not as extensive or substantial as those written before, I have adopted the following policy: references to these early works, which underwent considerable revisions, are to the first editions, as collected in the first two volumes of the Longman edition by John Woolford and Daniel Karlin; references to the works from *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* onwards are to the 1888-89 edition, which the other three critical editions use as their copy text. As the number and type of revisions in the later works are relatively insignificant, the final versions of these texts are in general also representative of Browning's aesthetics at the moment of composition. Whenever there are textual differences between the first edition and the 1888-89 edition which are relevant for my analysis, I have taken these into consideration.

SHORT TITLES

Childe Harold = *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

CGW = *Casa Guidi Windows*

Corr. = Philip Kelley *et al.*, eds. *The Brownings' Correspondence* (see Works Cited)

OYB = *Old Yellow Book*

'Of Pacchiarotto' = 'Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper'

(i.e. the poem)

Pacchiarotto = *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper et cetera*

(i.e. the volume)

Parleyings = *Parleyings With Certain People of Importance in Their Day*

RCNCC = *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*

R&B = *The Ring and the Book*

'Transcendentalism' = "'Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books'"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is referred to as EBB.

Page references to the 'Essay on Shelley' refer to volume 1 of Pettigrew and Collins's edition of the *Poems*.

References to Friedrich Schlegel's writings give the title of the fragment in order to facilitate work with English translations. All of Schlegel's texts to which reference is made are in volume 2 of the *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel Ausgabe* (see Works Cited).

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 on page 33:

Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri). *L'Angelo Custode*. 1640. Museo Civico
Malatestiano di Fano, Italy.

Copy courtesy of the Armstrong Browning Library. Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

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<[http:// www.browninglibrary. org/jones206.htm](http://www.browninglibrary.org/jones206.htm)>

I. INTRODUCTION

A poem appeals through the tension between its two dimensions of content and form, which are both self-referential. On the formal level, self-reference is achieved through a higher degree of structuring than in prose. Metre, rhyme, stanza form, phonetic and syntactical patterns etc. emphasise the text's character as a work of art. On the level of content, the lyric poem is the speaker's subjective expression of his emotions and thoughts. The utterance enables the speaking consciousness to constitute and consolidate its identity through a process in which it is both the observer and the observed (Luhmann *Kunst* 153). This inherent self-reference is increased if the poem takes for its theme the creative process which generates a work of art or if it describes its own genesis. A further reflexive aspect is added if the text makes statements about poetics and thus articulates its own rules. The inclusion of critical discourse within the literary text abolishes the hierarchical distinction between literature and non-fictional metadiscourse. This dividing line is further blurred if the utterance is presented not as being by a fictional character but as that of the real author.

The object of this thesis is to examine poems which combine two or more of the above aspects, taking as a textual basis poems *in propria persona* by Robert Browning. The analysis will describe and interpret the problems and complexities which a high degree of reflexivity entails. Since the major source of self-reference in these poems is the confusion of textual hierarchies through the appearance of Browning within his own text, the differentiation of textual levels is an essential approach. While engaging with the established narratological concepts developed by Gérard Genette and his disciples, I will draw more particularly on the theory of hierarchical levels of observation devised by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, since it is better suited to analysing the modes of reflexivity in question.

At first sight, Browning, who is generally considered to apply the theory of the impersonal 'objective poet' from his 'Essay on Shelley', is not an obvious choice. Due to its verbal difficulties, which call attention to the construction of meaning, the formal level of his poetry is ostentatiously self-referential. Herbert Tucker even claims that 'the proper end of Browning's poetry is to foster an awareness of the means whereby meaning may happen' (*Beginnings* 188). But at the same time Browning limited self-reference on the content level by making the impersonal dramatic monologue his

preferred subgenre. This choice has to be considered in the context of a growing concern in the nineteenth century with self-consciousness, which arose in part when the Romantics substituted the subject's own consciousness for traditional external sources of meaning, whose validity came to be doubted. Seeing that it led to solipsism and paralysis, Browning rejected this approach fairly early in his career. By modifying the Romantic expressive lyric to make the poem the self-constitution of a character other than the poet, he avoided the precarious exposure of the poet's own consciousness. Given his acute awareness of the problems inherent in the self-expressive mode, it is surprising that Browning nonetheless wrote a fair number of poems in his own voice, often including other reflexive elements, such as remarks on poetics or accounts of the poems' own genesis. The analysis of the self-portrayal of this extremely self-conscious poet promises therefore a particularly rewarding insight into the intricacies and potentialities of self-reference.

I.1. The Notion of Second Order Observation in Systems Theory

In *Poetry as Discourse*, Antony Easthope criticises traditional subjectivist poetic theory, which considers the poem as the utterance of a unified consciousness (generally identical with the real author) and consequently makes homogeneity a criterion of aesthetic quality (30).¹ Easthope takes the internal disjunctions within poetry, which nineteenth-century critics and the New Criticism condemned as a stylistic flaw and thus tried to overlook, as the starting-point of his theory. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, he sees the subject as split, and identity as the continual process of interaction between the two poles of the subject (39).² This split is manifest on two textual levels, for which Easthope uses Emile Benveniste's terminology: 1. *the enounced*, i.e. the narrated event on the level of content or the speaker's explicit statements (often about himself); 2. *the enunciation*, i.e. the speech event, which presents the enounced in a particular artistic form and with a specific intention (42). The *subject of the enounced* stands for the speaker who articulates his ideas within the poem, whereas the *subject of the*

¹ Cf. Hegel's definition of lyric poetry in his *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, Part 3, Section 3, Chapter 3.B or Spinner (4).

² Cf. Mead's interactionist psychology, which divides the ego into the poles of 'me' – the object of the ego's experience – and 'I' – the ego as subject, which can never be experienced (242ff.). The poem is a medium of the speaker's self-stabilisation because it permits the 'I' to confront its 'me'.

enunciation is the agency responsible for the formal design of the utterance, which thereby informs the reader's perception of the speaker (Easthope 43-4; Hühn 1: 13). Through a comparison of the two textual levels, the reader can apprehend how the speaker's subjective perceptions are mediated and how he constitutes his self. For the purposes of this study, there is no need to use Easthope's *subject of the enounced* and *subject of the enunciation*, which can be replaced with the established terms of speaker and implied author. However, with the *level of the enunciation* Easthope creates a convenient term for the discussion of the intersection between the implied author and the speaker, which moreover avoids the risk of confusing these two entities if the poem is *in propria persona*: the enunciation displays the different levels of consciousness of speaker and author, giving the author the opportunity to impart information over and above that which is provided explicitly by the speaker.

In the analysis of lyrical utterances, Easthope's approach can be fruitfully combined with Luhmann's notion of *second order observation* (Hühn 1: 13-14). I will briefly summarise the essential elements of Luhmann's Systems Theory which are relevant for my thesis. In doing so, I am aware that he frequently and consciously over-generalises to make his point. I hope to show that Browning's complex case benefits from the application of this theory, while at the same time revealing some of Luhmann's notions to be too schematic. Luhmann sees modern society as a network of self-referential, operationally closed *functional systems*, which can vary in their size and complexity from economic macrostructures to the system of a single consciousness. Their operations are governed by *differentiations*, i.e. asymmetrical binary pairs, of which one side is marked as positive, such as legal / illegal for the judicial system, profitable / unprofitable for the economic system, or good / bad for the moral system (*Beobachtungen* 119-24). These systems are the result of the transition from a pre-modern, hierarchically stratified class society to *functional differentiation*, which Luhmann dates from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Ideally, each modern functional system is *autopoietic*, i.e. it produces and reproduces its elements out of itself ('Autopoiesis' 26). It is not conceived to fulfil functions outside its own context but concentrates rather on following its inherent rules and replacing external relations with internal differentiations (*Beobachtungen* 120).

For the art system, operational closure means exclusive regulation by the governing differentiation beautiful / ugly, or, arguably, interesting / boring (Plumpe 2:

297ff.; Werber *passim*). Functional differentiation allowed libertine and some Enlightenment literature to disparage dominant moral codes, but it also devalued traditional justifications for the existence of art. Since the system became self-referentially closed, art was no longer a mere *mimesis* of an external reality – despite the project of realism and naturalism in the arts and literature. Neither could it claim to reveal truth, to present ideals or to be morally edifying, because these categories now belonged to other systems. This crisis was most strongly felt by the Romantic artist, marginalised in a society in which he was losing contact with other functional systems. The strategies for coping with this situation are best illustrated by the French Romantics. Some tried to maintain the intersection of systems either by taking high political office or through highlighting social and moral concerns in their works (Constant, Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Hugo); others opted for the splendid isolation of the poet in his ivory tower (Vigny, Musset).

Although it diminished the social status of the artist, this isolation made the Romantic period one in which art could, in terms of its defining criteria, become an autopoietic system more independent of other systems. Of course, overlaps with other systems continue to exist until the present day, especially with the economic system through the commercialisation of the art market. But economic categories are not valid for determining the quality of a work of art. Romanticism is modern, within Luhmann's terms, in that it revels in the system's autonomy in a way which is only surpassed by its more radical heir, *l'art pour l'art*.³ Disregarding the advice of logicians to avoid self-reference and the irresolvable contradictions it entails,⁴ Romantic Irony experiments with these. Its preference for the fragment reveals a taste for the open-endedness of the continuing process of autopoiesis. Romanticism also sees the rapid development of literary criticism as an ongoing autocritique and self-regulation of the closed art system (Luhmann *Kunst* 462ff.).

Criticism uses the device of *second order observation*, which apprehends and articulates the functional differentiation of society. Luhmann defines *observation* in general as any kind of perception or articulation of a perception (*Beobachtungen* 98). *First order observers* observe the external world, whereas *second order observers* observe other observers. The purpose of second order observation is to find out not

³ For an account of the autonomy of German Romantic aesthetics and literature, see Werber 38ff.

⁴ See Bertrand Russell's theory of hierarchical types as a method of avoiding paradoxes which are caused by self-reference (Whitehead and Russell Chapter 2).

what but how the first order observer observes (*Beobachtungen* 44). Second order observation offers a choice between considering certain perceptions as inherent characteristics of the observed object or ascribing them to the first order observer (*Beobachtungen* 101). As a result of the shift from first order to second order observation, however, it becomes more common to attribute features not to the object but to the observer. Since a large range of perspectives is available to first order observers, the same environment can be observed in a great diversity of ways. Luhmann sees this as a proof of the relativist plurality of subjective realities (*Kunst* 150). Like Deconstruction, Systems Theory is therefore post-ontological, denying the existence of an objective and accessible ultimate reality. The thesis will seek to show to what extent and to what effects Browning can be seen to endorse this view, especially in *The Ring and the Book* (hereafter *R&B*).

The second order observer has no direct access to the experience of the first order observer. But this is compensated for by his ability to perceive the possibility of alternative observations where the first order observer does not see any and believes himself to act naturally or out of necessity (*Kunst* 104). Psychoanalytical techniques or ideological critique can then be employed to reveal the unconscious or repressed aspects of the first order observer which may have motivated his choice of perspective (*Beobachtungen* 102). Since observation always depends on the observer's point of view, it can never be absolute. Even the second order observer remains unable to see certain aspects of his self and the criteria for his own observation. These *blind spots* (*Kunst* 96), which are external to his field of vision, may be observed by a third order observer, who has his own blind spots. Second (and third) order observation is thus another exercise confirming the impossibility of an absolute perspective.

Hence it follows that comprehensive self-observation is unattainable. However, introducing a temporal dimension does permit self-reference. One first takes the stance of a first order observer, and after a temporal gap proceeds to the distanced second order observation of one's former self as *hetero-reference* ('*Fremdreferenz*'). The distance of second order observation thus enables the consciousness to see certain, though not all, aspects of its self which it could not seize as a first order observer, since its range of perception was limited to the immediate experience of its environment.

The work of art is a device for making perceptions available for observation and communication (*Kunst* 82). Browning uses a visual metaphor to characterise the

highest form of poetry as the art of the 'Makers-see' who 'Impart the gift of seeing to the rest' (*Sordello* III, 902 and 842). Literary discourse differs from normal communication in that its referential function is subordinate to its artistic form. Its artificiality serves as a reminder that its purpose is not merely to transmit *information* on the content level, but that it has to be understood as a *message* with a precise communicative intention (*Kunst* 70). The work thus encourages the recipient to search out the difference between information and message and to take the stance of a second order observer in relation to the observations conveyed in the work. Art is produced in order to be observed and to facilitate observation, but due to the limitation of points of view it can also demonstrate the impossibility of observing the world objectively (*Kunst* 116).

Luhmann's theory can be applied to the analysis of poetry within the context of two functional systems: the poem is both an element of the art system, contributing to its ongoing autopoiesis, and it is the medium through which the system of a consciousness conceives of itself, i.e. the text stages the self-conceptualisation of its speaker. Easthope's distinction between the level of the enounced and the superior consciousness reflected on the level of the enunciation corresponds to the relation between limited first order observation and the wider range of perception of second order observation. Through the formal design of the utterance, the implied author is able to signal certain motives or emotions which escape the speaker's consciousness. The poem invites the reader to engage in several kinds of second order observation: firstly, he can readily observe how the speaker perceives his world; secondly, in the many lyric poems in which the speaker reflects on his actions and feelings and thus already engages in a form of second order self-observation, the reader can critically observe his self-conceptualisation. The Romantic expressive lyric, with its reflexive elements in the enunciation which draw attention to the act of composition or to the identity of the speaker as a poet, derives its main interest from the observation of the speaker's constitution of his self and his view of the world. By this means, the reader can, finally, become a third order observer of the author as a second order observer of his speaker and take account of the way in which he observes the speaker.

I.2. The Dramatic Monologue as a Literary Manifestation of Modernity

In *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum argues that the new poetic forms developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the dramatic lyric and lyric drama in Romanticism, and the dramatic monologue in Victorian and modernist poetry – emerge as means of exploring a rising concern with perception and the disequilibrium between an experience and the reflection it engenders (35). Not surprisingly, Langbaum's study focuses on the dramatic monologue, which with its clear dissociation of speaker and author relies more on the second order observation of how the speaker conveys his perceptions than the Romantic subgenres. Indeed, second order observation is the underlying principle that makes the genre so attractive: its effect depends entirely on the discrepancy between the explicit statements of the speaker in the enounced and the enunciation, which is ascribed to the author. The language foregrounds its role as a non-transparent, manipulating medium: connotations, implications of words and metaphors, syntactical and stylistic particularities which seem to be accidental and do not fit into the self-conceptualisation of the enounced draw the reader's attention to issues which the speaker overlooks or represses. The internal contradictions reveal that the view of the world voiced by the speaker is an illusion. He is either pre-modern in Luhmann's sense and believes in the existence of an objective phenomenological world, or he is modern enough to instrumentalise his utterance to shape his view of the world according to his wishes. The enunciation shows that the speaker's self-conceptualisation in the enounced is always subjective, because he is not aware of his blind spots and naturally employs simplifications in order to create a homogeneous, though fictional, self.⁵ In displaying the subjectivity of the speaker's world view and self-conceptualisation, the dramatic monologue implicitly rejects the belief in a stable, monolithic identity and objective reality. Though this critical attitude cannot always be ascribed to the author's consciousness, the genre thus anticipates the undermining of the individual's integrity and of traditional epistemology in modernist and postmodernist fiction.

The discrediting of the speaker's point of view suggests an ironic stance. John Woolford defines the dramatic monologue as balanced between what Langbaum calls

⁵ Cf. the approach of conceptual psychology, which uses for this reduction of complexity the metaphor of filters that organise and constrain information (Jopling 251).

‘Romantic empathy’ and the author’s ‘Augustan irony’ (*Revisionary* 68). Although – with the possible exception of the title – the authorial intention is not explicitly manifest in the text, the reader’s evaluation of the speaker is influenced. The irony consists in presenting a speaker who employs the Romantic method of constituting his ego and world within the poem, but whose consciousness is deprived of the old authority (Slinn *Discourse* 33). He is thus demoted to an ‘exalted subjectivity ironically demystified’ (Tucker ‘Dramatic Monologue’ 228). Through its ironic observation of the lyric poem as a subjective illusion, the dramatic monologue also contributes to the continual autopoietic self-regulation of the art system.

In the dramatic monologue, poet and reader are always allies in the second order observation of the subjective, limited perspective of the fictional speaker.⁶ However, the separation of speaker and author which distinguishes the genre from the self-expressive lyric is an incentive for the reader to proceed, in turn, to a critical observation of the author and to speculate on the motivations underlying his choice of subject and its formal presentation as well as the latter’s limitations and interests. This may offer telling insights, because the author of the dramatic monologue seems to be a classical ironist who wants to impose his point of view and does not doubt his own objectivity, which can in fact only be a *relative* objectivity in relation to the speaker’s more obvious subjectivity (Slinn *Fictions* 9).

The non-transparency of the speaking consciousness to itself, the psychological analysis effected through the observation of hidden aspects of its psyche, the relativism of the speaker’s subjective perspective, the impossibility of observing the world objectively, and the reflexive reaction to other elements of the art system are all – as mentioned above – constitutive features of modernity as defined by Luhmann. The dramatic monologue is therefore the literary manifestation of modernity *par excellence*.⁷

⁶ Cf. Luhmann’s analysis of the novel since Romanticism, in which author and reader conspire to observe the partial blindness of the characters (‘Weltkunst’ 36). For Luhmann, this observation of the inability to see embodies the specific perspective of literature in modern, functionally differentiated society.

⁷ Whenever the term ‘modernity’ is used in this thesis, it has to be understood as defined by Luhmann.

I.3. Romantic Irony as another Indicator of Modernity

The modernity of the dramatic monologue is highlighted by its similarity to the device of Romantic Irony, by which the author undermines not a fictional speaker but himself. Gerhard Plumpe considers Romantic Irony to be a prime indicator of the artist's awareness of functional differentiation (1: 160ff.). Clyde Ryals has analysed Browning's use of this paradigm in the early works until 'Christmas Eve' (*Becoming; World* Chapter 3). Though there is no proof that Browning had direct access to Friedrich Schlegel's theory,⁸ and though he denied having read the German idealists (Orr 100), he is likely to have had some acquaintance with their thought.⁹ Ryals argues that even without assuming the influence of Schlegel, the independent development of the paradigm by Browning and other Victorians would be a logical reaction to the *Zeitgeist* with its instability of meaning and rejection of absolute values (*World* 14).

Romantic Irony differs from classical irony in that it does not allow the reader to infer a stable value system on the part of the author. It displays the consciousness of an insoluble conflict between two opposed ideas which might both be true (*World* 3). It focuses especially on the antagonism between the absolute and the relative, *being* and *becoming* (Schlegel 'Lyceum' frag. 108). The ontological impossibility of encompassing the infinite within the finite has its parallel in the epistemological impossibility of absolute consciousness, which Systems Theory explains as the limited perspective of any observation. The ambiguity of Romantic Irony is therefore a formal solution which an author may design to cope with his experience of the impossibility of absolute observation and his unwillingness to accept this state of affairs.

The basic condition for the Romantic ironist is a sceptical awareness of the subjectivity of his own point of view, which is the result of self-observation (Plumpe 1: 163). He uses self-reflexivity to draw attention to the fact that his effort to portray the infinite complexity and mutability of the world within his finite work is doomed to fail. This usually takes the form of a rupture of fictional illusion, metadiscourse as in Browning's *Pauline* and *Sordello*, or the description of the act of creation of the work

⁸ Schlegel himself does not use the term 'romantische Ironie' but 'Sokratische Ironie' ('Lyceum' frag. 108).

⁹ As potential sources of information on contemporary German theory Ryals suggests Browning's studies in German literature at London University and the friendship with Carlyle (*Becoming* 67-8). On the possibility of indirect reception through British reviews and translations or Coleridge, see Mason (143ff.), Woolford (*Revisionary* 209, n. 6) and Woolford and Karlin (*Poems* 1: 371).

itself, including the exposure of its limitations (Schlegel 'Athenäum' frag. 238). The author's distance from himself is most apparent in his recourse to self-parody, which deprives the reader of any certainty about his point of view ('Lyceum' frag. 108). Drawing a parallel with the Italian *buffo* and *arlecchino* as well as the Attic *parabasis*, Schlegel calls this alternation of affirmation and undermining of the author's self *transcendental buffoonery* ('Lyceum' frag. 42). Formally, the indeterminate *hovering* ('*Schweben*') between confident *self-creation* ('*Selbstschöpfung*') and *self-destruction* ('*Selbstvernichtung*', 'Lyceum' frag. 37; 'Athenäum' frags 51 and 116) can be situated – in a parallel to the dramatic monologue – on the levels of the enounced and the undermining enunciation respectively. Schlegel calls for the reader's active participation with the author in creating the meaning of the text, in bringing about what he terms a '*Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie*' ('Lyceum' frag. 112). The '*synthetische Schriftsteller*', the author who would write this kind of work, corresponds to Browning's definition of the 'synthesist' poet in *Sordello* (running titles to Book V). This co-operation between author and reader also resembles the reading strategy of the dramatic monologue.

Schlegel sees irony as a conscious recognition of the eternal dynamism and the infinite chaos of a world without *telos*, as a continual flux of *becoming* ('Ideen' frag. 69). The '*progressive Universalpoesie*' which translates this experience into literature reflects life's plenitude through the formal arabesque of mixing styles, genres and fiction with criticism ('Athenäum' frag. 116). On the one hand, the inclusion of criticism within the work of art contributes to the autopoiesis of the art system; on the other hand, the arabesque betrays the wish to reverse functional differentiation by making literature the master system in which the systems of philosophy, morals, religion etc. merge.¹⁰

I.4. Browning's Poems *in propria persona*

Let us now turn to Browning's poems *in propria persona*, i.e. those poems which bear no indication that the speaker is a fictional character and whose content suggests, through parallels with Browning's biography or interests, that they might be uttered by

¹⁰ See Plumpe on the tension in Schlegel's aesthetics between, on the one hand, modern Romantic Irony and the concept of the fragment and, on the other, pre-modern myth (1: 151-72).

him. The question arises how a poet who exposes so mercilessly the subjectivity of his monologues can present himself. We even have to ask why, despite his claim to compose only 'dramatic' poetry,¹¹ he chose to write any poems in his own voice.

An explanation is offered by the conventional interpretation of Browning's career, which distinguishes three major stages: the initial Romantic period, during which he created fictional heroes as thinly disguised *alter egos* of himself; the objective dramatic monologues of the middle period, which cancel out the poet's voice;¹² and the return to a more subjective stance in the late poems, in which he often voices his personal beliefs directly or through the mask of his speaker. The poems *in propria persona* – which are spread over his whole career – might therefore express a conscious or inadvertent nostalgia for the early Romantic ideal which he could not emulate and for a less problematic mode of self-expression which disregards the heterogeneity of his self. This would mean that in these poems Browning ignores the foregoing differentiation of textual levels, on which the success of his major poetry is based, and reverts to the notion of the unchallenged authority of the poet-speaker. The enounced would then be the explicit utterance of his authorial intention and have the status of a non-fictional statement. The studies of Browning's work which consider the speaker in *Sordello* and in Books I and XII of *R&B* as part of a discussion of his poetics, and the few monographs which contain analyses of the shorter poems *in propria persona*, generally assume that these poems indeed offer the simple, direct access to his private self and poetics that Browning was so reluctant to provide in the paratext (e.g. DeVane *Handbook*; Drew; Miller *Disappearance*).¹³

¹¹ See the private remark to EBB: '(all my writings are purely *dramatic* as I am always anxious to say)' (24 May 1845, *Corr.* 10: 234) and my quotations from the correspondence at the beginning of Chapter II. See also the public statement in the 'Advertisement' to *Dramatic Lyrics*: 'Such Poems as the following come properly enough, I suppose, under the head of "Dramatic Pieces;" being, though for the most part Lyric in expression, always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine' (Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 2:472). A further example is contained in Browning's letter to his publisher George Smith in which he retracts his offer to annotate the poems in his 1888-89 edition: 'I am so out of sympathy with all this "biographical matter" connected with works which ought to stand or fall by their own merits quite independently of the writer's life and habits, that I prefer leaving my poems to speak for themselves as they best can – and so to end as I began long ago' (quoted in Kelley and Peterson 91).

¹² This is not to say that dramatic monologues might not express views shared by their author, but Browning chooses not to endorse them officially through the use of his personal voice. He writes to John Ruskin: 'I may put Robert Browning into Pippa and other men and maids. If so, *peccavi*: but I don't see myself in them, at all events' (10 December 1855, Collingwood 201).

¹³ Miller is guilty of a more serious blurring of textual levels in that he only gives volume and page references to Kenyon's *Centenary Edition* when he quotes from Browning's poetry, frequently without giving the title of the poem. He thus does not even draw a distinction between fictional monologues and the poet's own voice.

As the poems *in propria persona* have been considered only in a thematic context in conjunction with the dramatic monologues and the major long poems, their formal characteristics and Browning's use of voice in them has never been studied systematically. The few readings which focus on and call into question the status of the speaker 'Browning' as an unambiguous mouthpiece of the implied author either appear in articles on an individual poem (Menaghan and Dupras on *R&B*) or are applied to a single poem in a general study (Ryals's study of Romantic Irony in *Sordello*, *Becoming* Chapter 4; Bristow on 'Transcendentalism'; Slinn on *R&B*, *Discourse* Chapter 5). These isolated interpretations justify a more comprehensive study of Browning's poems *in propria persona* in order to explore the complexities of his self-portrayal through his own voice and to understand the very particular function which these poems fulfil within the corpus of his work. Given that so little can be concluded about his self-conceptualisation as an artist and his poetics from the surviving paratextual material, an extended analysis of the ways in which he chooses to present himself in the public realm of his literary text can give important insights not only into his conception of the world and of himself but also into his use of the literary text to reflect on these issues. The approach in this thesis provides new ways of isolating and analysing the particular characteristics of Browning's aesthetics to complement the many studies of the dramatic monologue and use of point of view.

A major argument of the thesis relates to the notion of Browning as a transitional figure between Romanticism and modernity. Browning's modernity has so far been argued with reference to the objectification of experience in the dramatic monologue, which is seen to anticipate the modernist concept of the mask (Flowers Chapter 4; Sinfield; Christ Chapter 2), his use of common speech (Flowers Chapter 3; Drew Chapters 4 and 5), the semantic indeterminacies, especially in *Sordello*, which call for an active reader (Tucker *Beginnings*; Latané 'Sordello and Aesthetics'; Froula), and his relativism in *R&B* (Langbaum *Poetry of Experience* Chapter 3; Killham), which has also been interpreted in deconstructionist terms (Findlay; Slinn *Discourse* Chapters 5 and 6). By bringing to bear a notion of modernity which differs from those applied so far, I intend to show that the poems *in propria persona*, whose personal voice usually disqualifies them as indicators of Browning's innovativeness, also illustrate his transition to a modern aesthetic and world view.

A first look at the poems *in propria persona* with regard to the use of voice reveals that the utterance is frequently presented like a dramatic monologue, i.e. it appears as a spoken address to someone other than the implied reader. This suggests that the poems cannot be reduced to the unproblematic equation of enounced and authorial intention, and that Browning deliberately applies the distinction of levels from the dramatic monologue to his own utterance, using the poem as a medium for his self-conceptualisation. Through the differentiation author (self-reference) / speaker (hetero-reference), he observes himself in the form of the speaker 'Browning'.

Browning might have derived the idea of the duplication of his self from this passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*:

[...] the SUM or I AM, which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self and self-consciousness [...] is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject. It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which pre-suppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses. (151-2)¹⁴

Besides, among his predecessors he would have found experiments with different methods of literary self-observation, including such complex solutions as Rousseau's multiplicity of selves in the *Dialogues Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*. Browning's technique is a logical compromise between two simple strategies: on the one hand, the distanced self-observation in poems spoken by a poet who projects aspects of himself on an external character (e.g. Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' or Wordsworth's 'A Poet's Epitaph'), and on the other hand, the self-observation of the Romantic expressive lyric, which is not detached enough to avoid solipsism.

If the speaker 'Browning' is presented under the same conditions as the monologists, it follows that he, like them, must be subject to the limitations of his point of view. Being a poet, he is of course more self-conscious than the average monologist.¹⁵ But he is still a character trying to impose his subjective views, whose strategies of self-conceptualisation can be observed and called into question by the reader. The fact alone that the poems *in propria persona* transgress the author's general principle of not speaking out in his own voice makes the status of the speaker's utterance problematic. This issue is complicated by the fact that 'Browning' clearly

¹⁴ Cf. Hegel's reduplication of the self in his aesthetics of self-creation (419-20).

¹⁵ Even among the speakers who are artists he stands out. In comparison to the acutely self-critical Cleon, 'Browning' is not separated from the readers by a historical distance, which makes Cleon's perception appear as narrower than theirs.

does not purport to disclose the innermost secrets of his psyche, as a poet in the tradition of the Romantic expressive lyric might do. The impression we get is that the speaker does not fully coincide with the real man, but that he is a fictionalised version of Browning's self, i.e. the enounced is not the authorial voice, but an entity from which the implied author with his wider range of perception distances himself in some way. As we have just seen, this indeterminacy of the author's stance is the chief feature of Romantic Irony, with its simultaneous endorsement and undermining of the author's very similar, but not identical, fictional double. Romantic Irony would thus enable Browning to engage in a kind of self-observation without really betraying his principle of not revealing his self in his poetry.

That Browning the poet devised such a sophisticated strategy of distanced self-observation in his poetry is the more plausible since Browning the man played similar games with his identity. He avoided the disclosure of his private self, but proved adept at creating fictional selves. In the courtship correspondence, he repeatedly states that even EBB does not know his inner self (11 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 69; 24 May 1845, *Corr.* 10: 233-4), while – as Daniel Karlin points out – his letters show him deliberately dramatising himself in the character of her inferior admirer (*Courtship* 51). Following Henry James's playful theory of 'the two Brownings', the public and the private man ('Private Life'; *Story* 2: 89), scholars have frequently commented on the hiatus between, on the one hand, Browning's fear of self-exposure as it appears in the child's shame of his nakedness, the adult's habit of wearing gloves, his reluctance to discuss his poetry, and his systematic burning of drafts, *juvenilia* and letters, and on the other hand, the self-confident, sociable literary lion of his later years (Altick 'Private Life'; Miller *Portrait* 104-8; Ward; Peckham *Victorian Revolutionaries* Chapter 3). The social *persona* is usually interpreted as a mask which Browning designed to hide his insecurity complexes. It is not the aim of this study to speculate on the psychology of Browning the man, but these anecdotes strongly suggest that the speaker 'Browning' is another version of him which appears to be a self-revelation but is in fact presented to protect the author from being scrutinised too closely by inquisitive readers.

As far as Browning the author is concerned, he shows an early propensity for the creation of fictional doubles. In his handwritten response to John Stuart Mill's notes in the copy of his first published poem *Pauline* (1833), he mentions the 'foolish plan' of inventing as facets of his self several fictional characters who were to write poetry,

novels, opera and speeches respectively. For the ‘*Poet* of the batch, who would have been more legitimately *myself* than most of the others’ – and who is coincidentally (?) called ‘Brown’ – Browning ‘had planned quite a delightful life’. This project is more than just a fanciful *post hoc* excuse designed to disavow the autobiographical import of the poem. It reveals a fascination with the possibility of splitting the author’s self, which is confirmed in the ‘*Essay on Chatterton*’ of 1842 by Browning’s interest in Chatterton’s device of dividing himself into a self as editor and the fictional creative self of the monk Rowley.

The purpose of the present study is to determine to what extent and in what ways Browning applies the differentiation of textual levels from the dramatic monologue and presents his fictional self for his own and the reader’s observation,¹⁶ possibly with the ambiguous self-undermining of Romantic Irony. My hypothesis is that his poems *in propria persona* are related to both the dramatic monologue and Romantic Irony, while serving the further function of allowing him to use the literary text as a locus for the discussion of his poetics. Luhmann’s theory, which interprets all of these aspects as markers of literature in a modern society, provides a useful paradigm for analysing this group of poems. My method is therefore a close reading of the chosen poems *in propria persona*, employing the concepts of enounced and enunciation. I will distinguish between, on the one hand, the fictional speaker, who articulates his ideas in the enounced and shares many characteristics but is not identical with the real Browning, and on the other, the implied author who encodes his second order observation of the speaker on the level of the enunciation.¹⁷

In approaching the speaker ‘Browning’, I will pay particular attention to discrepancies between the two textual levels. On the level of second order observation, the analysis will search for indications that the enunciation undermines the speaker’s authority. Besides the stylistic devices mentioned in section I.2, this can be expressed through any hints of the speaker’s limited perspective, personal interests, emotional involvement, problematic value system or notable contradictions with other points of

¹⁶ Cf. Luhmann’s thesis ‘daß das Individuum sich für die eigene Intransparenz, für die Selbstintransparenz, dadurch entschädigt, daß es sich als Kunstwerk transparent macht’ [‘that the individual makes up for its own intransparency, i.e. its self-intransparency, by making itself transparent as a work of art’] (‘*Weltkunst*’ 7, my translation).

¹⁷ To prevent confusion, I generally avoid the term ‘poet’, which might refer to both speaker and author. The only exception to this rule is in the analysis of *The Ring and the Book*, where I use ‘the poet’ to distinguish ‘Browning’ from the other speakers.

view.¹⁸ I will investigate the degree of internal incongruity within the different poems to see in which cases the split is particularly prominent, in which it is effaced, and which texts oscillate between identification and distance. The speaker has recourse to various methods of self-observation, such as the acceptance or refusal of role models, stereotypes, metaphors and modes of discourse, presenting himself as the object of observation by others, or defining himself through dialogues and retrospective or hypothetical narratives. I will seek to determine what these strategies reveal about his poetics and his self-conceptualisation, whether they are credible and compatible with each other, and whether the enunciation supports them or not.

Both speaker and author act within a communicative framework in relation either to a fictional or to the real audience. The analysis will explore whether and how their relation with their audience and their communicative intentions towards it differ. The author obviously uses the literary discourse of the poems to assume a certain control over his public image and the reception of his work.¹⁹ He does so by letting the speaker respond to criticism and by having him comment on poetics. This aspect can be interpreted as Browning's contribution to the ongoing autopoietic self-constitution of the art system, but it poses the problem of how to translate the statement of a poem, which is expected to use connotative discourse, into the author's denotative, non-poetic language (Weber 19). This is particularly relevant if the author distances himself from other aspects of the speaker's utterance and shows that the speaker's perspective is not privileged. By adopting a stance of third order observation, I will try to detect the motivations which underlie the author's choice of distance in some cases or the lack of it in others. Does Browning accept that his own poetics are subjective, or does the author not fully endorse the poetics of the enounced? Is Browning not always capable of a modern self-detachment? And if he wants his statements to be taken seriously, why does he not follow Carlyle's suggestion to choose an unambiguous, non-fictional discourse (21 June 1841, *Corr.* 5: 65)? I will argue that this hesitant poise between affirming and questioning the speaker's views is a feature of Romantic Irony, which Browning exploits to his own particular ends.

¹⁸ These criteria are adapted from Rimmon-Kenan's definition of the *unreliable narrator* (100-3), the prose parallel to the speaker of a dramatic monologue who has a limited or biased point of view.

¹⁹ The maze of disculpating paratexts surrounding the main text of *Pauline* already bears witness to Browning's preoccupation with authorial control over the poem's reception.

Browning often employs the same strategy in several poems. In the following five chapters the poems have therefore been classed according to two criteria which sometimes overlap. The poems either display thematic similarities – such as the confrontation with EBB (Chapter II) or with his critics (Chapter IV) and the juxtaposition with other poets and poetic concepts (Chapter VI) – or they resemble each other in their form of presentation, like the method of self-observation through hetero-observation (Chapter III) or the narrative poems in which Browning is the narrator (Chapter V). The analysis will progress from Browning's first poems *in propria persona*, in which he engages with one specific antagonist, EBB (Chapter II), and the staged self-observations in shorter poems (Chapter III), via the more complex confrontation with his public image and his critics (Chapter IV) and the extended self-portrayals as a narrator (Chapter V), concluding with his endeavour to situate himself in relation to other poets and abstract concepts (Chapter VI).

Due to the limited scope of a doctoral thesis, the study must confine itself to Browning's self-definition as an artist. The poems discussing poetics are more likely to display consciously arranged self-references, while the poems dealing primarily with the more intimate issues of love or religion, which have to be left aside, are more exposed to the danger of emotional involvement and the consequent collapse of the distinction of levels.²⁰ The fact that the poems *in propria persona* can only be defined *ex negativo* as lacking the indication of a fictional speaker makes the selection of some texts debatable. But if, in contrast to the great majority of Browning's poems, the identity of the speakers of such poems as 'Transcendentalism' or 'Popularity' is not clear, it is because the author deliberately chooses to present them so. Rather than excluding such cases in order to avoid the accusation of false attribution, I have decided to include them in the analysis to discover what Browning gains through the ambiguity.

²⁰ EBB's multiple roles as lover, ideal poet and muse make it difficult to draw a neat distinction between poems on poetics and love poems. Only poems about her that focus on poetics will be analysed.

II. SELF-DEFINITION IN RELATION TO ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Identity cannot constitute itself independently but is always generated by the self-observation of a consciousness which defines itself through its relationship with its environment. This relationship usually exists between the self and another consciousness; for instance, the private self – to the extent that such a category can be isolated – may often situate itself in relation to its beloved. The self of the artist may likewise define itself in relation to a tradition or a particular predecessor. Modern criticism on Browning, following Harold Bloom, has made us familiar with the tradition and the particular precursor in his case: Romanticism as personified by Shelley, the idol of Browning's youth. In this chapter, I propose to take a different approach and to examine Browning's attitude towards another representative of the Romantic tradition, whom he considered as a model poet and who had a great significance for the conceptualisation not only of his artistic but also of his private self: his wife.

By 1845, when he met Elizabeth Barrett, Browning had overcome his romanticising early period under the influence of Byron and Shelley and was writing plays and dramatic monologues. He had at last developed a personal, original style. However, the path he had taken was diametrically opposed to the prevalent concept of poetry in the period, since contemporary taste expected a lyrical poem to be the expression of the poet's private, subjective emotions. EBB wrote in this tradition and figured accordingly among the most popular poets of the period. Browning must have become particularly conscious of his lack of an audience in contrast to the great demand for her works when he assumed responsibility for negotiating with her publishers after their marriage.

In their discourse of mutual praise in the courtship correspondence, which bears witness to both lovers' need to define themselves in terms of a one-sided power-relationship in which the other is the greater poet, Browning styled EBB as the ideal lover, muse, audience and critic (19 April 1846, *Corr.* 12: 263; 24 May 1846, *Corr.* 12: 353). Already in his second letter he defined her in terms which anticipate his concept of the subjective poet in the 1852 'Essay on Shelley', whereas he described himself as an inferior objective poet eager to emulate her example:

[...] for you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time – you speak out, *you*, – 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: but I am going to try.. (13 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 22)

Underlying this admiration is Browning's linguistic theory which distinguishes two types of poet. Those like himself, who are aware that the signifier is always at a remove from the signified, perceive language as an obstacle and have to struggle with the materiality of the medium. This is expressed in such distinctly physical metaphors for language as the comparison of developing a new poetic discourse with welding armour in *Sordello* (II, 568-601).¹ For poets like Shelley or EBB, this problem does not arise because they have the gift of using poetic language as a quasi-transparent means of self-expression.² In contrast to the latter's equation of personality with poetic discourse (10 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 17), Browning considered himself as yet unable to convert conception into expression:

[...] what I have printed gives *no* knowledge of me – it evidences abilities of various kinds, if you will, – and a dramatic sympathy with certain modifications of passion.. *that* I think: but I never have begun, even, what I hope I was born to begin and end, – 'R.B. a poem.' (11 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 69)

As Karlin remarks, Browning appreciated EBB's poems less as works of art than as expressions of pure personality (*Courtship* 182). Praising her confident use of personal voice, he apparently conceived of himself as an anti-poet whose work lacked the necessary self-expressive element:

My poetry is far from the 'completest expression of my being'³ – I hate to refer to it, or I could tell you why, wherefore,.. *prove* how imperfect (for a mild word), how unsatisfactory it must of necessity be. (24 May 1846, *Corr.* 12: 353)

In reply, although she first maintained that the dramatic was 'the highest faculty, the strongest & rarest', EBB encouraged him to reconsider the subjective mode:

Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides, – & after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself out of that personality which God made, & with the voice which He tuned into such power & sweetness of speech. I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much & deeply on life & its ends, you should not teach what you have

¹ Cf. George Eliot's review of *Men and Women*: 'Language with him does not seem spontaneously to link itself into song, as sounds link themselves into melody in the mind of the creative musician; he rather seems by his commanding powers to compel language into verse. He has *chosen* verse as his medium; but of our greatest poets we feel that they had no choice: Verse chose them' (Litzinger and Smalley 177).

² That EBB did not share Browning's idealising view of her expressive powers is apparent in the doubts she voices in 'The Soul's Expression' and no. XIII of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

³ The fact that Browning quotes a phrase from the preface of EBB's 1844 *Poems*, i.e. that he incorporates her discourse within his own, shows how readily he adopts her aesthetic categories.

learnt, in the directest & most impressive way, the mask thrown off however moist with the breath. And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively.. I have seemed to observe *that!* [...] Yes, *now* I feel that no one can know you worthily by those [dramatic] poems. (25 May 1846, *Corr.* 12: 358-9)

Despite her apparent humility, she cast herself in the dominant role of his benign adviser on poetic issues – and Browning was only too ready to accept her authority:

I shall do all, – under your eyes and with your hand in mine, – all I was intended to do [...] (6 February 1846, *Corr.* 12: 45)

Hinting at another, more practical reason for his eagerness to change his mode of expression, his failure as a playwright, he added:

I have lost, of late, interest in dramatic writing, as you know – and, perhaps occasion –⁴ And, dearest, I mean to take your advice and be quiet awhile and let my mind get used to its new medium of sight, seeing all things, as it does, thro' you: and then, let all I have done be the prelude and the real work begin – [...] (13 February 1846, *Corr.* 12: 70)

During the courtship, both lovers agreed to submit their unpublished texts to the other's criticism. But Browning never corrected any of EBB's works – excepting some suggestions about her translation of *Prometheus Bound*, which were related to the original text and not to her treatment of it – whereas he eagerly adopted almost all of her proposed corrections to *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy*. His trust in her gift for spontaneously felicitous expression went so far that he was not even willing, on one occasion, to accept her retraction of an emendation (26 July 1845, *Corr.* 11: 4-5).⁵

It is therefore not surprising if, in the first poems after their marriage and in later poems in which EBB appears either as a physical presence or as a literary influence, Browning ventured on a second, differently motivated confrontation with the subjective lyric mode. This chapter will examine the six poems *in propria persona* in which he most clearly conceptualises his identity as a poet in relation to the poet EBB. The second order observation which these texts permit is that of Browning's own poetics (self-reference) in relation to hers (hetero-reference). My analysis will focus on his various strategies for dealing with those implications of her poetic mode which are not congenial to his own style. Since the poems are evenly spread over a period beginning

⁴ In the love letters, Browning flatters himself by pretending that he abandoned drama out of scorn for the theatrical milieu, whereas it is perfectly clear from the correspondence with Macready that he courted the actor and theatre manager to have his plays performed.

⁵ See Karlin's comment on the infelicity of this emendation (*Courtship* 93) in his discussion of the lovers' mutual corrections (*ibid.* 86-94).

immediately after the marriage and ending shortly before his death, it will also be possible to trace some chronological development in his attitude towards her as a poetic model.

II.1. 'The Guardian-Angel'

'The Guardian-Angel' is the only poem known to have been composed during the first three years of the Brownings' marriage. It was written in the last week of July 1848 (DeVane *Handbook* 262). There are many indications that, now fully exposed to EBB's influence, Browning had indeed decided once more to tackle the Romantic subjective mode. From the apostrophe to his friend Alfred Domett and the local references to Fano and Ancona, where the Brownings were staying at that time, we can identify the speaker as 'Browning'. This makes 'The Guardian-Angel' the second instance of a poetic utterance *in propria persona*, the first being in *Sordello*.

Like the painting which it describes, the poem is, or seems, highly sentimental and has religious overtones, reflecting the Victorian taste for pathos as a proof of the key value of sincerity and the notion of poetry as a quasi-religious utterance (Keble 2: 481). Compared to other, more typically Browningsque poems, the diction is strikingly unoriginal and conventional. Through intertextual allusions, such as the reference to the angel as a 'bird of God' (18) recalling the bird-shaped angel in Dante's *Purgatorio* (II, 38), or the echo of the opening of Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' in the phrase 'when eve / Shall find performed thy special ministry' (3-4), the speaker situates himself in the self-expressive tradition. Similarities to Keats's poetics and technique are even more obvious. The statement

All is beauty:
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared? (33-5)

refers back to the enigmatic final line of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. And like Keats, Browning makes the response to a work of art an occasion to express personal sensations and opinions. All of these Romantic echoes seem to classify the poem as poetry in the sense which John Stuart Mill defines, i.e. its 'peculiarity [...] lie[s] in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener', and it is 'feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude', 'overheard' by the reader (348). The purpose of the utterance is

not an objective *ekphrasis*, which is deferred until stanza vi: the painting seems to be merely a pretext for venting personal anxieties.

However, in more matter-of-fact language, the last three stanzas reveal *a posteriori* that the utterance is a defence of Guercino in the context of an aesthetic debate about the value of the seventeenth-century Bolognese school during the Gothic Revival.⁶ The poem turns out to be intended as rhetorical persuasion, designed to convince an audience, and thus the very opposite of poetry if we follow Mill's definition of 'eloquence', which is '*heard [...] feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action*' (348-9). The avowal of its practical function reduces the importance of the personal response to the painting and even calls into question its spontaneity and authenticity, two central Romantic values. The final stanza tries to resolve the clash between the involvement in a rhetorical argument and the subjective, lyrical opening. In a metapoetic commentary – which proves he is aware of the persuasive possibilities of his utterance – the speaker explains his principle of composition: he admits that his true motivation was not self-expression, but that the best way of promoting Guercino's art was giving an example of his own personal response to it and offering it for second order observation in his poetic medium:

I took one thought his picture struck from me,
And spread it out, translating it to song. (52-3)

If the poem is not a consistently subjective effusion and the speaker in the enounced takes a detached view of the first part of his own utterance, does the author also distance himself from the speaker's self-conceptualisation? Let us first examine more closely how the speaker consciously presents himself, and then search for indications in the enunciation which point to a different evaluation on the author's part.

The speaker's nostalgia for childhood is a common Romantic *motif*. Yet here the child is not valued for his unconscious visionary faculty, but appears as weak and dependent. The speaker manifests a certain conceptual narrowness: he does not want to face the world of real men, but he is at the same time unable to relate to an abstract notion and prefers a concrete intermediary, a tangible 'gracious face' (17), to heaven's open door. Addressing the 'Dear and great Angel' (1) in ostensibly Wordsworthian

⁶ See Weikert's analysis of the poem as a reflection of the contemporary taste in art (109-13).

diction, he uses the submissive conditional mode of 'wouldst thou only' (1) and the supplicating question 'wilt thou' (18) to ask for guidance in the right way of worship. His immobile stance 'beneath' (23) the angel, expressed by the static verbs 'Let me sit' (3) and 'I gaze' (9), the passive construction 'And suddenly my head is covered o'er' (10), and his role as a grammatical object (ll. 2, 3, 6, 13, 18, 19, 24), contrasts with the angel's mobility and activity: he steps, bends, lifts, presses. The speaker's submission to the angel's guidance is absolute in that it includes the three central aspects of human experience which he mentions: perception (eyes), thought (brain), and action (hands). The desire to perceive the world through the assistance of the angel,⁷ to rid himself of his own thoughts ('the brain, which too much thought expands', 25) and the metaphor of intellectualism as an illness ('healing', 23, 32) might refer to the supposedly too intellectual tendency in Browning's previous poetry, as opposed to the ideal of poetry associated with simplicity, emotion and 'soul' (45). This ideal, towards which the speaker claims to aspire, is of course embodied for Browning by the perfect subjective poet EBB. On the whole, the speaker's self-abasement is an extreme version of Browning's stance in the courtship correspondence. Betty Miller would take this as a corroboration of her thesis that, in consciously choosing a dominant wife, Browning was hoping for 'a prolongation of the conditions of his childhood' with a dominant mother (168). However, since in her letters and poems EBB frequently assumes a pose of dependent passivity, it is also plausible to see the speaker as imitating her example.

So, in the enounced, the speaker seems perfectly reconciled to his passive role and anxious to abandon his individual identity in submission to the guardian angel. But this is undermined by the enunciation, as the act of making an utterance here clearly is an assertion of selfhood and a break away from passivity. Whatever their content, the imperatives remain grammatical commands and can be understood as orders imposing on the angel a behaviour which suits the speaker. In contrast to the speaker's eager embracing of the angel's control over him, the enunciation does not invite us to see this attitude as positive, since the terms describing the angel's action, such as 'tether' (20), 'Pressing' (25) or 'suppressed' (28), immediately call up an association with violent constraint. The negative connotation of 'suppressed' is emphasised by its position at the end of a line and the juxtaposition with two positive terms: '[...] quiet, happy and

⁷ Cf. Browning's intention, as quoted above, of 'seeing all things [...] thro'' EBB when writing in his new style (letter of 13 February 1846, *Corr.* 12: 70).

suppressed'. The impression of forced enclosure is supported by the rhyme scheme, which links the first and the last line of each stanza. This rhyme is especially prominent since it is the only one with three rhyming words.

Besides, it is difficult to believe that the willing abandonment of his autonomy and individual identity is a position with which Browning as a poet would seriously sympathise. The speaker expresses the wish to undergo a sort of brainwashing in order to replace his distorted thoughts by the aestheticist equation of beauty, love and duty. This could be interpreted as Browning's desire to avoid the complicated issues of theodicy and mutability which preoccupied him throughout his life. Yet the conditional mode of stanzas iv and v hints at the impossibility of recovering a simple paradisiacal 'world, as God has made it!' (33).⁸ Moreover, as the narrator's development in *Sordello* demonstrates, this is an aesthetic concept that Browning had already overcome by this stage of his career through the acknowledgement of the co-existence of good and evil and the principle of perpetual striving.

The passive ideal in the enounced is further undermined when, after the lengthy reflection on the unworldly attitude of the child, the speaker's attention suddenly shifts to the angel

with his own head turned away
Over the earth where so much lay before him
Of work to do, though heaven was opening o'er him [...] (39-41)

The angel's anticipated engagement with the world is mediated through the echo of the closing lines of *Paradise Lost* (XII, 646), in which Adam and Eve turn away from the protective realm of Paradise to face the challenges of the external world. Although the explicit identification in the enounced is with the child, the shift of focus here, which is an aspect of the enunciation, appears to imply that the author sympathises with the active charity of the angel. This attitude is in keeping with the speaker's altruistic devotion to 'suffering humanity' in Book III of *Sordello*. It is also mirrored by the more masculine, factual style of the last three stanzas, which manifests a turn away from the passivity of the beginning. The author seems so intent on conveying this point that he becomes unfaithful to Guercino's painting, in which the angel's sight is in fact

⁸ Cf. the optimistic interpretations of Pippa's 'God's in his heaven – / All's right with the world!' (*Pippa Passes* I, 221-2), which do not take into consideration the ironic context in which this is uttered (e.g. DeVane *Handbook* 95).



Figure 1: Guercino's Angelo Custode

not 'turned away / Over the earth' but directed more towards three cherubs in the clouds and away from the city in the background (see *Figure 1*).

The reference to the two other characters summarises the conflict in the speaker's consciousness. The first of these, EBB, shares his experience of the painting, giving it thus more reality and relevance. Assigning her the role of his concrete, tangible, human 'angel' (46) means that she takes over the dominant part and, like the guardian angel, absorbs the speaker's separate identity in hers. This must be perceived as positive by the speaker, for whom she incarnates the ideal fusion of the three elements mentioned in the Keatsian phrase (33-5): beauty, (human) love and duty (as implied in the marriage vow). Complete self-abnegation is of course considered a necessary step towards a mystic fulfilment in God. However, the choice of a conspicuously negative vocabulary on the level of the enunciation here does not make EBB's influence stand for more genuine self-fulfilment – as projected in the correspondence – but rather for self-cancellation through submission to her.

Unlike the relationship with EBB, that with Domett is one on equal terms. The apostrophe to the 'dear old friend' (54) helps to confirm the speaker's distinct identity because it emphasises that the friendship goes back to the time before Browning decided to submit to EBB's influence. It is easier for the speaker to define himself in terms of the intimate relationship with the lover who is physically present than to relate to the friend thousands of miles away. Nevertheless, the poem – which is, like any communication, an appeal to the addressee to acknowledge the speaker's existence – is not addressed to EBB but to the friend who allows the speaker to be himself. Again, the decision on the level of the enunciation to balance the self-effacement caused by EBB with an addressee who strengthens the speaker's sense of individuality points to the author's revolt against an unconditional submission to her values. The conflict between the two different relationships as points of reference is most concisely expressed in the juxtaposition of deictics in the final line: 'This is Ancona, yonder is the sea.' The speaker defines himself as securely settled in the precise geographical location of Ancona near his lover, with whom he visits the enclosed space of the Fano church, but the fact that he ends on a view of the vast, endless space of the open sea suggests an underlying desire for independence. This also appears on a stylistic level: the penultimate line 'How rolls the Wairoa at your world's far end?' clearly marks the

return from the uncharacteristic sentimentalist diction used throughout most of the poem to a genuinely Browningsque voice.

Consequently, although the poem has often been read as a straightforwardly regressive Romantic poem (e.g. Ormond 189), it articulates Browning's conflicting desires to become a subjective poet in the manner which EBB advocates, and to remain true to his own objective mode. He projects the wish for subjectivity onto the level of the enounced and the underlying reluctance to relinquish his identity onto the level of the enunciation. This makes for a predominantly subjective poem on the surface, while at the same time the author can explore the self-conceptualisation of an insecure speaker, treating the utterance like a dramatic monologue, which invites us to observe the process through which the speaker perceives his environment and himself. Browning the author establishes a critical distance from the speaker, his fictional self. As in Romantic Irony, where the reader is never sure whether the author supports the explicit statements put forward in his text, the speaker's self-conceptualisation is simultaneously endorsed (in the enounced) and undermined (in the enunciation). To make the conflict more salient, Browning not only relies on the subtle difference between the textual levels in the first part, but adds the internal inconsistency of a progression from a lyrical opening towards the more rhetorical discourse and the suggestion of a hidden desire for independence in the last two stanzas.

Finally, 'The Guardian-Angel' hints at the problem implied in EBB's advice to Browning to speak out and be himself in his poetry. At this stage she might not be aware of the contradiction here, because it does not apply to her as a naturally subjective poet. Her poetry is self-expression, so that in his first letter to her Browning can rightly equate self and poetry: 'I do, as I say, love these Books with all my heart – and I love you too' (10 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 17). Speaking in one's personal voice means writing subjective poetry, but since Browning's distinct personal mode is impersonal objective poetry, a subjective poem would not give expression to his genuine *artistic* character. This puts him in a double bind which makes it impossible ever to satisfy EBB. His awareness of this *impasse* will become more prominent in 'Old Pictures in Florence' and especially in 'One Word More'.

II.2. 'Old Pictures in Florence'

In 'Old Pictures in Florence' (probably composed from 1850 to 1853),⁹ EBB's influence is manifest through the resemblances to the concrete textual model of her *Casa Guidi Windows* (published in two parts in 1848 and 1851), whose authority is cited in line 260. This long political poem expresses her support for the *Risorgimento*, the Italian movement for national unification. Intertextual references include verbal echoes, the aesthetic and political message, as well as structural and tonal similarities which appear mainly at the beginning and the end of the text. Like his wife's poem, Browning's is in his own voice, opens with his view of Florence from the windows of Casa Guidi, links the poet's visits of churches to the discussion of the interrelation of generations of artists, and chooses Giotto's unfinished campanile to the cathedral of Florence as a symbol of undaunted aspiration.

The poem repeats in a more radical way the move from initial subjectivity to objectivity already encountered in 'The Guardian-Angel'. The first two stanzas recall a Romantic description of nature, especially through the Wordsworthian echo of the leaping eel (2) as a symbol of spontaneous joy. The unusual presentation of an urban space as a landscape with aloes and olive trees draws attention to this deliberately Romantic *motif*. The associative progression from an observation of natural phenomena to an abstract reflection is reminiscent of the Romantic meditative lyric, but the generic expectations built up in this opening are disappointed by the somewhat impudent apostrophe to Giotto, which leads to a very un-Romantic middle section. The first line of stanza iii reads indeed like the characteristic dramatic address at the opening of a dramatic monologue. Despite some lingering lyrical phrases in stanza iv and the speaker's assumption of the stance of a Romantic *vates*, who 'By a gift God grants me now and then' (30) has a vision of the spirits of the pre-1500 primitive painters (the so-called 'old masters'), the tone of the utterance becomes increasingly discursive and conversational. When he addresses the Italian public in stanzas vii-xx, the inclusion of their direct speech (81), colloquialisms like 'what matters' (152) or 'heigh ho' (184) and exhorting imperatives render the poem quasi-dialogic. Yet the inserted metalinguistic remark '(ends my allocution)' (159) indicates that at this point the speaker switches to a retrospective self-observation and becomes aware of his

⁹ See the speculation about a composition in two stages by Weikert (134).

authoritative tone. The defence of the old masters against the public's depreciation and the speaker's self-conscious admission of his communicative intention also resemble the defence of Guercino in 'The Guardian-Angel'.

In contrast to the earlier poem, however, Browning here seizes the occasion to voice his aesthetics. He wants to correct the public's failure properly to appreciate the old masters. The public does not understand that older 'primitive' painters were 'Art's spring-birth' (178) and prepared the ground for the achievements of the High Renaissance. To make this point, Browning juxtaposes the innovative old masters with those of their contemporaries who adhered to the exhausted classical tradition. The implicit reference seems to be to the mannerism of the Byzantine school. Browning revises established standards by reinterpreting the ideal of classical perfection as sterility, inferior to the 'primitive' painters whose imperfection he values as a potential for vital growth and future improvement.¹⁰

The passionate interest which the speaker takes in this subject is not surprising, given the analogies between the old masters and Browning's own aesthetics and reputation: the old masters are 'self-acquainters, / And paint man man' (147-8). They not only attempt to replace unattainable ideals with realism and depict man in the context of ordinary life as Browning does, but they are also expressly praised for their self-consciousness, which made them turn their 'eyes inwardly one fine day' (114). This, I believe, shows that Browning conceives of the early Renaissance as the historical period which discovers the principle of second order observation as a factor in aesthetic creation and appreciation. The old masters are the first to shift the focus of attention from the observation of ideal, but typified, petrified emotions and external matter to the observer's point of view and motives. Aesthetics and religion interweave because second order observation allows the old masters to attain a deeper insight into the human psyche and thus 'To bring the invisible full into play' (151), i.e. to portray the soul as opposed to Greek paganism and Renaissance worldliness.¹¹ The combination of spirituality and a style accused of being 'rough-hewn, nowise polished' (126)

¹⁰ This attitude must be seen in the contemporary context of the Gothic revival, which paradoxically associated Attic classical art with political conservatism and feudal Gothic art with liberalism.

¹¹ For the influence on Browning of Alexis François Rio's emphasis on the spiritual and moral dimension of paintings, see DeLaura ('Context'). Cf. also 'With Gerard de Lairese': 'You saw the body, 'tis the soul we see' (173). It was indeed due to their strong faith without regard to technical perfection in their paintings that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood chose the early Renaissance painters for their model (Korg 102).

certainly corresponds to Browning's concept of his own poetry. The old masters' technical imperfections are excused by their difficult stance as innovating pioneers who prepare the ground for the accomplished High Renaissance masters, so that they should be treated with indulgence and imaginative sympathy. We will see in the analyses of several poems that Browning frequently conceives of himself as the type of the unacknowledged predecessor of a new poetic tradition who will only be properly appreciated after his death.

None of the ideas developed so far are undermined by the enunciation. This is not surprising as the inclusion of art criticism within a literary text indicates that the speaker has a high degree of self-consciousness which leaves little space for blind spots. Still, he prefers to distance his self-observation by transferring it onto pictorial art, although the parallel between the painters and Browning remains quite obvious. References to literature are conscientiously avoided, except for the joking sting in the remark that the supreme reward of the greatest High Renaissance painters is to become 'poets' in heaven (55).¹² The device of indirect self-observation through a thinly veiled hetero-observation has two advantages. Firstly, it can be read as a strategy to achieve a better reputation through changing the readers' fundamental outlook on aesthetics without having to argue overtly that they should apply their new insights to Browning. Secondly, self-conceptualisation as an artist is so central to Browning – who in his youth decided never to take up a profession and to become a full-time poet (Gosse 20 and 84) – that it is understandable he should wish to place the observation of his own lack of fame at some remove from himself.

The same holds true for an even more intimate instance of self-revelation, the declaration of Browning's optimistic faith, which the speaker does not formally endorse. The opening of this passage, 'There's a fancy some lean to and others hate –' (161), dismisses the optimists' point of view as a mere 'fancy' and attributes it to a limited number of people – excluding the speaker himself – while pointing to an alternative. This alternative is given as much space as the first opinion, although it is clearly not the creed which the poem undertakes to promote. Moreover, the speaker seems uncertain which side to take. He cannot judge the truth of the first, optimistic creed, saying 'Yet I hardly know' (169), and admits to being attracted by the less

¹² This need not be taken as a conscious effort to heighten the value of poetry. The hierarchy of arts is based on the medieval classification of *artes liberales* like poetry as superior to *artes mechanicae*, to which painting belongs (Weikert 119).

complex concept of rest from earthly striving in heaven. At the same time, the remark ‘And I have had troubles enough, for one’ (176) allows Browning to slip in another oblique allusion reminding us of his unjustly poor reputation.

In contrast to the backing of the enounced by the enunciation on the subjects of aesthetics and religion, the next section (stanzas xxiii-xxxI), which shows the speaker in the less intimate role of an art amateur, displays an ironic distance between the textual levels.¹³ The speaker addresses several old masters, complaining that they permit their lost works to be rediscovered and bought not by him but by avaricious ‘dealers and stealers, Jews and the English’ (228). Of course, Browning as an Englishman falls into the latter category, but this paradox can be attributed to the author’s genuine conviction that he is a true art lover and distinct from the *nouveau riche* tourists and collectors. Ironically, the catalogue of hypothetical paintings which the fictional Browning would like to discover includes works which the real Browning already owns, namely Taddeo Gaddi’s ‘St Jerome’, Margheritone’s ‘Crucifixion with Saints’ and Pollaiuolo’s ‘Christ at the Column’. What can be the motivation for this divergence of fact and fiction? Out of collector’s pride, Browning the man might be using the medium of his poem to point out what a fine *connoisseur* of pictorial art he is, while making a private joke for an intimate circle of readers who know his collection.¹⁴

For Browning the author, these paintings serve as raw material out of which he can develop a deliberate self-parody. Whereas the earlier Hudibrastic rhymes ‘Theseus’ / ‘knees’ use’ (98, 100) and ‘Giotto!’ / ‘[...] not?’ “O!” (133, 135) do not produce much of a comic effect, the language employed in this section exposes the speaker so obviously to ridicule that the author must be tongue-in-cheek – if the speaker is not also self-mocking. A *crescendo* of indignation leads from relatively humble questions using the polite conditional ‘Could [...]?’, via the irreverent address to Margheritone as ‘You bald old saturnine poll-clawed parrot’ (220), to the second apostrophe to Giotto. The speaker is too excited to remember whether he visited the church of San Spirito or Ognissanti in his hunt for forgotten treasures. His inability to think clearly is also manifest in the increasingly fragmented, breathless syntax, with repetitions such as ‘to

¹³ The change in the relation of enounced and enunciation might also be due to a temporal gap in the composition, which Weikert (134) assumes and which would facilitate a critical self-observation.

¹⁴ According to the 1913 Southeby’s auction catalogue, most of these paintings, such as the Gaddi and the Margheritone, were falsely attributed (Ormond 199; Weikert 130-1), so that Browning’s claim to be an art expert is undermined.

whom? – to whom?’ (240), an abundance of exclamation marks, phrases without a predicate, and the comically melodramatic ‘I, that have haunted the dim San Spirito’ (241) rhyming with ‘Patient on altar-step planting a weary toe!’ (243). At this moment, when the irony is so obvious, the speaker finally states in the enounced his realisation of how absurd he is. In a parallel to his remark in line 159, ‘(ends my allocution)’, he switches to a critical observation of his own discourse and evaluates his choice of the Koh-i-noor diamond for a metaphor as ‘a platitude’ (245).¹⁵

The only way out of this ridiculous plaintive pose is an abrupt change of subject. The final prophecy is an ideal solution to divert attention from the speaker, because it is by definition divinely inspired and thus independent of the prophet’s personality. In three respects, the prophecy marks a circular return to the beginning of the text: it focuses on Giotto’s campanile, reverts to the initial visionary mode of utterance, and is full of echoes of *Casa Guidi Windows*. In the middle section, Browning avoids the political animus which dominates EBB’s poem. Instead, he develops a purely aesthetic minor detail – her defence of Cimabue’s technical deficiencies (*CGW I*, 351-61) – into the main point of his poem. Similarities persist as he transposes political elements from her poem onto an artistic plane, for instance by substituting the daring of dead patriots and national poets with the creative innovations of the old masters. Significantly, his use of the word ‘revolution’ (157) is limited to an aesthetic meaning, and whereas EBB evokes Niobe as an analogy for Italy whose children are being killed in their struggle for freedom (*CGW I*, 32), in Browning’s poem she has a purely aesthetic function as a classical *topos* for the basic emotion of grief (102).

The sudden introduction of the political theme in the coda is an interpretative crux that is usually criticised as an incoherence. But the fact that Browning does this in three other poems – ‘England in Italy’, “‘De Gustibus –’”, and ‘Cenciaja’ – suggests that the abrupt transition is no coincidence. It would in fact not have been discouraged by EBB, who praises this very move in ‘England in Italy’ by declaring that it ‘gives unity to the whole.. just what the poem wanted’ (21-22 October 1845, *Corr.* 11: 134). Two critics discern in this apparent disjunction an underlying unity. Julia Markus (50) argues that the close relation between art and politics was so obvious to the Brownings and their Florentine circle that they forgot it was less so for the British public, and that

¹⁵ Besides, the appropriation of the jewel for the imperial crown also makes it an inappropriate reference in a poem advocating democratic revolution.

Browning therefore did not see the need for a smooth transition. This interpretation still implies that the poem is artistically flawed because it does not make the connection apparent in its structure. More concerned with the literary dimension of the text, John Woolford tries to discover a unity by interpreting the discussion of architecture and painting not as an aim in itself, but as an extended metaphor for the Italian revolution. He sees the poem as an instance of what he calls a ‘discursive’ ‘displacement of political onto *aesthetic* discourses’ (Woolford and Karlin *Browning* 181-2). Though the stance on Italian politics is certainly a major concern, this would make it a primarily political text and devalue the importance of the speaker’s aesthetic and religious self-definition. These issues, which take up so much space, in my view constitute the central interest of the poem.

In contrast to Markus and Woolford, who read the text as a second order observation of politics without taking into account the set-up of the text as a second order observation of its speaker, I wish to argue that the thematic break is a deliberate authorial strategy. It is made so flagrant in order to dramatise within the consciousness of the speaker the practical impossibility of bridging the gap between the political poetry of *Casa Guidi Windows* and Browning’s paramount concern with aesthetics. Throughout most of the poem, the speaker successfully avoids imitating EBB’s political discourse by ‘aestheticising’ it and speaking for his individual self rather than presuming – as she does – to be the voice of the people. But as a result of his problematic self-observation in stanza xxxi just before the coda, he tries in the coda to divert attention from himself by adopting EBB’s prophetic mode and forcing her political concern onto his utterance. The speaker takes pains to emulate *Casa Guidi Windows*: he acknowledges his debt through the bracketed reference ‘(Ex: “Casa Guidi,” *quod videas ante*)’ (260) and many verbal echoes – e.g. the civil guard’s shooting the sky, Orcagna and the stone of Dante – including the playful reversal of ‘the fair side of the Alps’ (*CGW* I, 1081) in ‘the worse side of the Mont Saint Gothard’ (251).

Nevertheless, in the enunciation a resistance can be felt to considering aesthetics as a mere means to a higher political end in that the coda surreptitiously continues to reverse the hierarchy of politics and art. Of course, ‘Pure Art’ and the republic are associated in *Casa Guidi Windows*, but priority is always given to politics, whereas in Browning’s pairing of ‘art and history’ (266) art is named first, just as in ‘How we shall

prologize, how we shall perorate' (265),¹⁶ literary discourse is given precedence over political eloquence. While EBB wants to use art to incite the people to a revolution, Browning speaks of the importance of democracy as providing favourable conditions for the flowering of art. His *Witanagemot*

Shall ponder, once Freedom restored to Florence,
How Art may return that departed with her. (261-2)

Likewise, the 'hated house' of Habsburg-Lorraine will be replaced not by another dynasty but by the artist Orcagna (263-4).¹⁷

The final vision of the completed campanile poses another problem. Although it is a suitable metaphor for the construction of a unified Italy with the assistance of art in *Casa Guidi Windows*, its celebration of closure contradicts the advocacy of imperfection at the heart of Browning's poem. The speaker appears here to make a final effort to emulate the discourse of his model, but it is improbable that, after having maintained a critical distance throughout most of the poem, the author with his higher consciousness is blind to this markedly inconsistent privileging of closure. The deferral of the tower's completion to an indefinite future, and the building's original function as a symbol of the free sovereignty and civic unity of the fourteenth-century Florentine state¹⁸ whose constitution was still far from democratic, hint that closure and a democratic Italy are indeed unattainable.

Similarly, even though the final word is 'I' with its association of confident subjectivity, the poem does not end on an unconditional submission to the pattern of *Casa Guidi Windows*. The last stanza furnishes further indications that an enthusiastic personal involvement in EBB's manner is not wholeheartedly endorsed. As Woolford remarks in his comparison of the proof sheets and the first edition, the textual revisions make this stanza increasingly impersonal and less naively enthusiastic (Woolford and Karlin *Browning* 29). In the proofs, the speaker experiences the removal of the tower's scaffold in the company of Giotto and in the present tense, whereas in the published version the event is located in the future and the doubting interrogative phrase 'Shall I

¹⁶ The hidden allusion to his own 'Artemis Prologizes', which was intended as a prologue to the resurrection of Hippolytus, emphasises the theme of the regeneration of Italian art and liberty.

¹⁷ Browning's liberalism has the same motivation as his fascination with the imperfect. EBB chooses political commitment for moral motives, whereas Browning's love of liberty is rather aesthetically motivated. Similarly, Ruskin explains his appreciation of Gothic imperfection in terms of moral categories, while Browning seems more attracted by its aesthetic appeal (King 101).

¹⁸ See Jack and Meredith (5: 292), quoting Glenn Andr es *et al.* *The Art of Florence* (98).

be alive [...]?’ (281) cancels the speaker’s presence. It seems therefore that the text was revised to emphasise the speaker’s underlying uneasiness at the mode he has finally come to adopt.

In sum, ‘Old Pictures in Florence’ turns out to be even more disjointed than ‘The Guardian-Angel’. It experiments with both the lyrical and the dramatic mode and with various relations between enounced and enunciation, ranging from identification to a clear ironic distance. The sections on aesthetics and religion evince a desire for self-expression, but even in these passages self-observation is oblique, and the intervention of the self-parodying address to the painters shows that this mode cannot be sustained. The highly individualised, rough diction which bursts the rigid stanza form also flouts EBB’s advice that Browning follow a more conventional ideal of smoothness. Despite the patched-up transitions, the poem achieves a certain unity through its circular structure and a compromise between EBB’s and Browning’s aesthetics in the transposition of her political concern onto an aesthetic level.

II.3. ‘One Word More’

‘One Word More’ is generally considered to be the one indisputable instance of Browning’s disclosure of his private self. The immediate paratext surrounding the poem furnishes ample evidence of its personal nature: the dedication ‘To E.B.B.’, the date ‘1855’ – a unique case among the shorter poems – and the addition of the signature ‘R.B.’ in the editions after EBB’s death, which suggests that he has finally realised his ambition to write “‘R.B. a poem’” (11 Feb. 1845, *Corr.* 10: 69). The use of the initials as in the courtship correspondence, and the title’s echo of the letter in which EBB tries to discourage his devotion to her and asks him to ‘leave it [his love] without one word more’ (31 August 1845, *Corr.* 11: 54), let the poem appear as a continuation in the poetic medium of the lovers’ private dialogue (Forsyth 293). In her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, EBB was the first to transfer their private discourse to poetry, albeit behind a fictional veil. Until 1849, the collection remained hidden from Browning, as he himself explains, ‘because I happened early to say something against putting one’s love into verse’ (undated letter of 1864, Curle 114). It is all the more ironic that Browning, who condemns the expression of private emotions in poetry, should pick EBB up thus on the only instance in which we find her forbidding him to voice his feelings. In

contrast to the rest of their relationship, it would seem that for once *he* is the one to advocate the personal poem. This radical reversal of his habitual attitude raises the question of whether the self-revelation in this poem can be taken seriously. The poem's classification under the heading 'Men, and Women' in the 1863 *Poetical Works* also invites us to read it like a dramatic monologue, i.e. to observe critically how the speaker's argument develops and how it is motivated.¹⁹ In my analysis, I will seek to establish how much or, as I will argue, how little Browning actually discloses of his self, how he justifies this reticence and how he deals with the contradictions which arise from his decision to spell out why he does not like to speak in his own voice.

The poem opens on a confident assertion of the speaker's identity as a poet:

There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished! (1-2)

First he presents his characters, stressing his control by the use of the possessive determiner; then they acknowledge him as their creator through enumerating the fifty poems to him. However, there is a less obvious reading of 'Naming me' as: 'My fifty men and women identify me with my fifty poems.'²⁰ This solution is suggested by the fact that the speaker in the next two lines offers the volume to EBB as a present, declaring that 'the book' is inseparable from his self ('me'). Without taking into consideration the genre of the texts in the collection, it would thus seem that Browning has at last attained the identification of poetry and personality for which he admired EBB in the courtship correspondence and of which he thought himself incapable. Yet knowing that almost all the poems in *Men and Women* are dramatic monologues, we have to understand his meaning to be that the collection is an expression of his self in the sense of his artistic character and not an unmediated private self-expression. This is a restatement of the problematic implications of EBB's wish that Browning be himself in his poems. Tucker sees 'teasing phrasal ambiguities' such as this as a strategy to discuss his private self without disclosing it ('Escape Artist' 14).

The explanation as to why he can only be himself in dramatic poems begins – appropriately enough for an objective poet – with a long passage on the communicability of love, in which the speaker takes the stance of an external observer,

¹⁹ On the problematic generic classification of the poem, see Gibson ('One Word').

²⁰ On the acknowledgement of the poet as creator through naming him as compared to the taboo of naming the divine Creator, see the sonnet 'The Names' (1884).

thus avoiding self-observation for 104 lines. The examples of Raphael and Dante develop the dichotomy of the private and the public self, a central theme of many poems *in propria persona* (see especially Chapter IV).²¹ The fact that the poem takes this distinction for granted bears witness to the Victorian acceptance of the fragmentation of the individual into various social roles in a world of increasingly complex social interaction. In contrast to the Romantic yearning for a homogeneity of the self, one finds among the Victorians a greater reconciliation to the fact that such unity is impossible. There the private self is considered more authentic since it is less determined by the agreed codes of behaviour in the public sphere and consequently accord love – arguably the most private emotion – a high prestige. This value system is reflected in the speaker's preference for Dante's and Raphael's private communications to their lovers over their famous public works.

Communication with one's lover is facilitated when one can 'be the man and leave the artist' (71), i.e. one can escape the expectations and the confrontation with criticism which the public role entails (Erickson 163). The message can be adapted to the requirements of a single addressee, and as the beloved is the central element in the lover's system of consciousness, he is familiar with the system's code and can easily decipher messages (Luhmann *Liebe* 18). Indeed, the lovers' intuitive understanding makes verbal communication almost superfluous ('Your heart instructs you.', 10; 'You know me.', 144), so that an intimate whisper ('You whisper "Beatrice"', 33) suffices. The repetition of 'You and I' at the beginning of four verse paragraphs underlines the lovers' unison. Intimacy as a prerequisite for complete understanding recalls the description in *Sordello* of the highest kind of poetry as 'brother's speech [...] where an accent's change gives each / The other's soul' (V, 615-17) and where poet and reader understand each other by 'half-words' and 'half-names' (V, 606). EBB is thus implicitly proclaimed to be the ideal reader.

Privacy, however, is not enough to guarantee successful communication, since it does not solve the problem of converting love, the non-verbal feeling *par excellence*, into expression. Any lover thinks his love so unique that language or other

²¹ On the development of the private / public dichotomy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Schmidt (106ff.).

conventionalised media of communication are inadequate to embody his meaning.²² This is particularly inhibiting for the artist, for what distinguishes artistic from 'normal' referential discourse is that the work of art self-consciously draws attention to its quality as a medium. Because of its reliance on the highly conventionalised signifiers of language and its extreme formal self-reference, poetry is in this respect the most radically self-conscious art form. The exceptional use of an alien medium which 'One Word More' proposes is essentially a strategy to avoid self-observation.²³ In one's own art, one takes the higher stance of second order observation of the work's formal aspect, whereas in a new medium one is too busily engaged in constituting a first order observation to include oneself in it. The acute self-consciousness of the poet causes the paralysis of creativity in many Romantic poems. The expedient of Romantic poets in shifting from the observation of their own medium to an unselfconscious focus on nature, which lets them become creative again, and their valuing of authenticity parallel Browning's solution here, which is enhanced by the sentimental linking of sincerity, unselfconsciousness and silence, as will become apparent at the end of the poem.

Having fervidly advocated the need to change one's medium (50-72), it is all the more surprising that Browning does not quite practise what he preaches. Self-consciousness is even heightened: the enounced mentions the possibility of escaping the constraints of conventional love poems, but the enunciation situates the text in the extremely self-referential subgenre of poems discussing the difficulty of putting love into verse. Of course, the appeal of such poems lies in the paradox that, through their refusal of the love convention and the eloquent protestations that they cannot say how and how much they love, the speakers in the end do manage to convey their feelings.²⁴

Browning prepares us to accept his exemption from the norm firstly by arguing it on the grounds of form and then by referring to his poetic character. Although the

²² Cf. the letter of 11 March 1845 (*Corr.* 10: 121), in which Browning laments that the conventional formula 'Yours ever faithfully' has lost its significance, saying: '[...] if these words were but my own, and fresh-minted for this moment's use!'

²³ Browning takes up here an idea upon which he has twice touched already. In an early letter, he names poetry as his medium but adds that when 'real and strong feeling called for utterance, either Drawing or Music seemed a much fitter vehicle than "verses:" and for a long time I resorted to them, chiefly to music' (9 August 1837, *Corr.* 3: 264). The sculptor Jules in *Pippa Passes* decides to try out painting after he has fallen in love.

²⁴ An additional paradox is that these poems often claim to break away from their predecessors' conventions and to be original, for instance, in the opening sonnet of *Astrophel and Stella*, the speaker follows his muse's advice: '[L]ook in thy heart and write!' Yet on the level of the enunciation, the insistence on one's own originality and authenticity in this situation is already a convention going back at least as far as Roman poetry (Hühn 1: 60).

real Browning is an amateur sculptor and boasts to EBB that he has learned musical composition (14 June 1845, *Corr.* 10: 264), the speaker declares: 'Verse and nothing else have I to give you' (114). However, he suddenly modifies his stance by claiming that self-revelation is possible through the choice of an unusual variant of his own art, i.e. by writing his only poem in unrhymed trochaic pentameter (117-20). The superfluous examples of two other artists using new media (121-7) defer the climactic private revelation and increase the impatience of the reader, who has already been waiting for more than half of the text. But then Browning suddenly reminds us of his dramatic monologues, saying:

Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,
Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving [...] (133-4)

His identity is so determined by his impersonal poetry that he can only make the following statement:

Let me speak this once in my true person,
Not as Lippo, Roland or Andrea,
Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:
Pray you, look on these my men and women,
Take and keep my fifty poems finished;
Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also! (137-42)

Indeed, all he can say in his own voice is that he speaks in it, but despite his metrical originality he cannot verbalise any emotions or thoughts. He merely reiterates the statement with which the poem began.

If he did expose his private self in the poem, this would generate a double paradox. The text is already paradoxical in that it pretends to be a private utterance for an audience of one, while its publication turns it into a public discourse. By at least not making any private revelations in the public text, Browning escapes a second, more pointed paradox. Of course, he could easily have avoided both paradoxes if he had not added the poem to the collection but had inserted it only as an inscription in EBB's personal copy. The fact that he does not choose this simple expedient implies that, even if privately communicated, he can never make his poetry a *locus* for intimate self-expression.²⁵

²⁵ The other purely private reference besides the title is the inadvertent slip of the pen in the 1855 text which substitutes 'Karshook' for 'Karshish'. Only EBB would at that time have been able to understand the reference to 'Ben Karshook's Wisdom', which was first published in 1856.

The lack of a personal poetic voice is not to be confounded with J. Hillis Miller's claim that 'Browning has no separate life of his own because he lives his life in poetry' and that 'his "selfhood" must be defined as the failure to have any one definite self' (*Disappearance* 102 and 105). On the contrary, in the repetition of the dedication 'Where the / my heart lies, there let the / my brain lie also' (4 and 142), which is made more personal through the substitution of the definite article by the possessive determiner, Browning insists upon his private identity. He pleads with EBB to accept his impersonal poetry as it is and still to consider it as a token of his private love. He thus tries to attenuate the split of his identity by giving the impression that he achieves a certain unity of self and poetry. Yet the metalinguistic commentary 'Poor the speech; be how I speak, for all things' (143) concedes that it is not the ideal fusion of conception and expression.

At this point, the importance of the passage at the centre of the poem describing Moses' miracle of Meribah (73-108) becomes apparent. It is the closest Browning comes to self-revelation and at the same time offers some explanation as to why he cannot express his self. The observation of Moses – the biblical prototype of the divinely inspired mediator between God and his people and the type of the Christian vatic poet – is a distanced self-observation. The precarious stance of the prophet is not only a common analogy for the poet in the period,²⁶ but the prophet, whose voice mediates the divine will, is also an apt metaphor for the poet of a dramatic monologue, who lends his voice to his speakers.

The passage illustrates the poet's desire for a fulfilled private identity ('man's joy', 72) while suffering from 'the artist's sorrow' (72), i.e. his burdening self-consciousness and dependence on the public's appreciation.²⁷ As Karlin remarks (*Hatreds* 95), Browning deviates from the biblical sources by heightening the Israelites' ingratitude towards their prophet.²⁸ Moses' acute concern over their depreciation of his miracles suggests how essential the public's view is to the artist's self-conceptualisation. Moses is trapped in a double-bind relationship with the people: by

²⁶ For a definition of the poet through the same biblical episode in *Sordello*, see Chapter V.1.5. Cf. also Alfred de Vigny's 'Moïse'.

²⁷ Similarly, Norbert in 'In a Balcony' (661-78) and Cleon (273-300) see the simple man's authentic experience as more valuable than the artist's knowledge without the benefit of experience.

²⁸ The public's ingratitude is a recurrent concern in Browning's poetry and letters. See Karlin (*Hatreds* Chapter 5) and the analyses of 'Popularity' and the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto* in my Chapter IV.

means of his divinely sanctioned powers, he can command them ('Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath him', 75), but his authority only exists as long as they acknowledge him as their prophet. In stating that Moses is one minute immortal and the next mortal, and adopting for inspiration the phrase 'Heaven's gift' (73) from *The Prelude*, Book XIII (Jack and Meredith 5: 480), Browning comes close to Wordsworth's concept of the poet as a 'man speaking to men', not 'differing in kind from other men, but in degree' (*Lyrical Ballads* 255, 261). He also parallels EBB's discussion of the double nature of the poet in *Aurora Leigh*, published the year after *Men and Women*:

O sorrowful great gift
 Conferred on poets, of a twofold life,
 When one life has been found enough for pain!
 We, staggering 'neath our burden as mere men,
 Being called to stand up straight as demi-gods [...] (V, 380-84)

In Browning's poem, the people refuse to conceive of the poet as touching both the human and the divine realm. They either doubt that he can perform miracles or they compel him to assume the public role of the prophet unconditionally, without any space for private affections. Since his identity as the people's saviour is so utterly dependent on their acknowledgement, Moses eagerly gives them 'emphatic warrant' (96) that he is the prophet. In biblical typology, Moses is the most notable Old Testament type of Christ, and the water flowing from the rock at Meribah in particular is interpreted as prefiguring the blood flowing from Christ's side during his crucifixion.²⁹ The reference to this prefiguration of Christ's martyrdom justifies Browning's decision not to show his private self without letting this appear as a deficiency: although he would like to follow the principle of self-sacrifice for private love (illustrated by the camel which dies so its 'mistress' may live, 103-8), he is obliged to sacrifice his private self to and for the benefit of the community. And his lover must understand and approve of this heroic humanitarianism.³⁰

In spite of the resolution evident in the Moses passage, the comparison with the moon seems to be a final effort at some self-revelation. Again, though, it does not go beyond the statement that Browning like 'the meanest of [God's] creatures / Boasts

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians x,4 and Chapter VI.2. On the miracle's iconographical tradition, see Cook (*Lyrics* 235).

³⁰ To these reasons given by the speaker can be added the third order observation of the author's motives. If 'One Word More' valued the author's private voice above the dramatic voices of his speakers, this would reduce the value of the collection to which it serves as epilogue.

two soul-sides' (184-5). There is no hint as to the different nature of his hidden self: 'What were seen? None knows, none ever shall know' (180). On the contrary, the grammatical third person, the fictionality of the myth and the temporal distance from the historical characters distance the observation. Browning here avoids self-observation thanks to a surreptitious change of role into the minor character of the loving observer of the moon EBB, who becomes the focus of interest. Although he only admits in retrospect 'This I say of me, but think of you, Love!' (187), the feminine gender of the moon immediately suggests that not Browning but EBB is the focus of this passage.³¹

If it does not give an insight into his general private self, this shift still offers a view of Browning's self-image as a lover. The choice of the highly conventional moon imagery for the beloved woman, which he uses so frequently,³² is in keeping with the superiority-inferiority relationship as expressed in the love letters or 'The Guardian-Angel'. It is not quite clear whether the author here sees through this conventionality. Only in the late poem 'Poetics' (1889), which functions as a retrospective observation of his use of this discourse, does Browning take an overtly critical view of the moon as one of the stereotypically Romantic natural metaphors for the loved one and repudiate it in favour of a non-metaphoric praise of 'Her human self' (8).

Neither is it certain that the author is fully aware of the ambiguities implied in the similes which the speaker chooses in his speculation about the nature of EBB's hidden self. The first comparison that comes to his mind is 'like some portent of an iceberg / Swimming full upon the ship it founders, / Hungry with huge teeth of splintered crystals?' (169-71). The iceberg, which is so treacherously dangerous because most of it is hidden under water, is an odd simile for disclosure and seems to imply that even the private self does not reveal itself completely. Moreover, this simile alone is apparently not violent enough and has to be compounded by the metaphor of a

³¹ When comparing himself to the moon, Browning does not mention its one aspect which parallels his attitude towards EBB: the moon only shines because it reflects the light of the sun, just as Browning sees himself as reflecting her genius.

³² See the letters of 16 September 1845 (*Corr.* 11: 79-81) and the poems inspired by EBB ('Numpholeptos', the 'Epilogue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies*, 'With Daniel Bartoli') as well as *Sordello* (VI, 41-56), 'In Three Days', 'Pan and Luna', and 'Andrea del Sarto' (29-32). The latter provides the only other address of a husband to his wife in the collection and indicates that 'One Word More' is not just a dialogue with EBB but also with Browning's 'fifty men and women'. Andrea thinks he can control the division of Lucrezia into the public self of his paintings and a private identity for himself. He suffers from the fact that by using her as a model he also makes her sexually available. See also Gibson, 'One Word' 82-4. The danger of displaying too much of oneself in public and thus losing one's private self is elaborated in *Pacchiarotto* (see Chapter IV.3).

wild animal devouring its prey. This can be translated into a fear of the dominant EBB absorbing Browning's identity, as in the enunciation in 'The Guardian-Angel'. However, the spontaneous first association is carefully superseded by a strikingly positive simile from Exodus xxiv, 9-11. After the comparison with the pagan goddess Diana, EBB is now associated with the Christian God as seen by Moses through a relationship of contiguity: she is the sapphire pavement on which He stands (172-9). Browning's repeated identification with Moses stresses his dependence on EBB as her prophet who enjoys a privileged view of both aspects of her self.

Yet when it comes to communicating his view of her hidden side for the public, 'I hush and bless myself with silence' (197). The closure on 'silence', which was amended from the manuscript reading 'beauty', emphasises that an account of her private self cannot or should not be verbalised in public.³³ This may imply that the lovers' intimate verbal communication is only possible outside the boundaries of the public literary text. In that case, it is even further delayed by the addition of the final verse paragraph, in which Browning states that he has mentally formulated his communication and that EBB needs only to access his private self ('my bosom', 201). Or it can mean that language is generally insufficient for this purpose, so that the private self can only be expressed in the non-verbal union of souls described in 'By the Fire-Side' (126-40) or in sexual contact, the emblem of which is the fusion of selves in the kiss as described in 'Love Among the Ruins' or 'Now'.

All three poems analysed so far have shown Browning experimenting with the personal mode, making the literary text an arena for playing out the oppositions between EBB's and his own irreconcilable poetics. In the two earlier poems, which proclaim themselves to be primarily in defence of other artists, the conflict is mainly visible on the level of the enunciation, whereas the speaker is allowed only occasional retrospective insights in the enounced. Self-consciousness reaches a higher level in 'One Word More', because the disclosure of the poet's private self becomes the explicit aim of the text. Browning's exploration of the contradictions which self-expression entails for him as an objective poet finally leads to the admission on the level of the enounced of what the other two poems only express indirectly in the enunciation: Browning cannot and will not reveal his private self in public poetry. The strength of

³³ Browning here echoes EBB's argument in no XIII of *the Sonnets from the Portuguese* that she cannot put her love into verse and can only offer 'the silence of [her] womanhood' (9).

the poem lies in the fact that he not only openly declares his objectivity in his first direct address to EBB, but that he can now also justify it. Yet, although he does not explicitly verbalise it, he manages to convey his love through hints, the intimate address to EBB and the convention of love poems which disavow their expressive powers.

This profession of his objectivity is situated at the height of Browning's dramatic monologue period, 'One Word More' being the last poem written for the first of the two major monologue collections. It had taken him seven years finally to assert his independence from EBB's poetic model. A clear indication of his change of attitude is provided by the textual revisions for the 1849 *Poems* as compared to the 1863 *Poetical Works*. The 1849 revisions were begun in 1847, i.e. in the first year of the marriage when EBB's influence was strongest. They responded to some of her intellectual and religious concerns, and evened out and clarified diction as she had advised. The 1863 edition retracted many of these revisions and returned to the original reading (Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 1: 102). Nevertheless, 'One Word More' shows that Browning continued to be dependent on EBB for his private self-conceptualisation and still considered her the incarnation of the highest poetic ideal. Accordingly, the poetry written throughout the following years pursued the objective vein without further questioning it, while in the paratext – especially after EBB's death – Browning continued the cult of her artistic superiority. Statements like '*she* was the poet, and I the clever person, by comparison' (19 August 1871, McAleer *Blagden* 365) or 'The true creative power is hers, not mine' (quoted in Orr 235), and the quasi-religious capitalisation of 'Her' in letters to Isa Blagden (19 November and 19 December 1862, McAleer *Blagden* 133 and 142), indicate the degree of veneration for his wife. Though he avoided another poetic confrontation until after her death, the tensions in his attitude towards her would persist and would find renewed expression in a number of poems which referred to the deceased EBB.

II.4. 'O lyric Love...' (*The Ring and the Book*)

The first reference to EBB after her death is the apostrophe 'O lyric Love...' at the end of Book I of *R&B* (published in 1868-69), which is reprised at the end of Book XII. In these passages, EBB fulfils a whole range of functions for Browning's self-conceptualisation. First, the *topos* of invoking the muse is one of the poet's devices to

present the Franceschinis' domestic story, which clearly should not merit an epic plot, as representative of this highest literary genre. As the analysis of *R&B* will show (see Chapter V.2.1.3), allusions to her modern epic *Aurora Leigh* also style EBB as a model epic poet. Besides being idealised as a Madonna and suffering Christ figure, EBB is a 'half angel' (I, 1391): as in 'The Guardian-Angel', where she is 'My angel' (46), she is a mediator between heaven and earth, to which the speaker is confined. In celebrating her as a poet inspired by 'God who best taught song by gift of thee' (I, 1404), the speaker introduces, in addition to the epic pretensions of the poem, the portrayal of EBB as a prophetic lyric *vates*. He thus summarises *Aurora Leigh's* blend of epic scope and personal lyric voice.

In the enunciation, the invocations strive to imitate EBB's lyricism. They stand out as the most lyrical passages in Books I and XII. The whole poem closes with EBB's apotheosis in the quotation of Niccolò Tommaseo's inscription on the façade of Casa Guidi (XII, 873-4).³⁴ Here Browning adopts once more the role of her imitator, since he uses her 'rare gold ring of verse' as a basis for the ring of his monologue sequence. But at the same time he already presents himself in the role of the accomplished Romantic poet who is inspired through the 'interchange' (I, 1407) with his muse, so that he can fulfil his divinely ordained function, 'my song, my due / To God' (I, 1403-4). This implies that he is emulating her model successfully. Moreover, through the reminiscence in the description of EBB as Beatrice in the *Paradiso*, he establishes an even more ambitious parallel between himself and Dante, who for many Victorians represented the prototype of the poet as prophet. Roma King and Susan Crowl even seem to suggest a role reversal between Browning and EBB, when they speculate on the significance of Browning's use of the word 'guardianship' (XII, 667) for his laying of his ring around EBB's, whereby he reverses her guardianship of him in 'The Guardian-Angel' (King *et al.* 9:359-60).

There are no inconsistent terms or phrases in these two short passages which would indicate that the author distances himself from this surprising return to unconditional admiration of EBB and Romantic lyricism. Rather – as will be seen in the detailed analysis of *R&B* (see Chapter V.2.1) – the stark contrast with the speaker's self-portrayal as a detached historian and craftsman throughout the rest of his two monologues shows that he is unable or unwilling to adhere to a consistent self-

³⁴ Tommaseo's text is quoted by A. K. Cook (*Commentary* 273).

conceptualisation which excludes the potentialities of another kind of poet. The subjective lyricism undermines his overall claim to objectivity and highlights Browning's continuing inner struggle for a unified poetics. The next poem will confirm that his evaluation of EBB continues to be just as unstable as his self-image in this regard.

II.5. 'Amphibian' (Prologue to *Fifine at the Fair*)

In 'Amphibian', the prologue to *Fifine at the Fair*, Browning's oscillation between EBB's and his own poetics approaches the opposite pole. In this new effort at self-definition twelve years after her death, the speaker's spontaneous chain of associations leading from the butterfly via Psyche to the soul of EBB indicates how much she still dominates Browning's thought.³⁵ Essentially, both the prologue and the epilogue, 'The Householder', assert his reluctance to die and to be immediately reunited with his wife. However, in contrast to the truly personal epilogue, there lingers beneath the confrontation between life and death that is played out on the surface of the text the hidden issue of poetics: the portrayal of EBB as a soul in the heavenly sphere and Browning's orientation towards real life on dry land characterise their respective kinds of idealist and realist poetry. Without denying the more obvious dimension of the text, I will focus my analysis on this latter aspect.

The superiority of EBB, who is 'watching the uncouth play' (26) of the swimmer from above, is never questioned. Now that she 'has for [her] home the whole / Of heaven' (35-6) and has further approached divine perfection, it becomes even more impossible for Browning to emulate her. His clear inferiority serves him as an excuse for not adopting her as a model. We will see that in the opening of *Sordello* and in 'Cenciaja' he has recourse to the same conventional rhetorical strategy of praise and humility *vis-à-vis* an awe-inspiring poet to justify his different mode (see Chapters

³⁵ Despite the thematic link between prologue and epilogue and the main poem, the speaker of 'Amphibian', who is obviously a poet, seems to be neither Don Juan nor an anonymous speaker as Ryals claims (*Later Poetry* 62). The image of swimming in the sea as a means of self-definition rather suggests an utterance *in propria persona*. Firstly, sea-bathing became one of Browning's favourite holiday pastimes in the 1860s and 1870s. Secondly, it establishes an intertextual reference to the self-portrayal of Byron's narrator *persona* at the end of *Childe Harold* (canto IV, stanza clxxxiv). Of course, swimming appears as a metaphor in Don Juan's monologue (stanzas lxiv-lxix), but stands for a slightly different idea.

V.1.4 and VI.1). So far, the stance is in line with the resolution expressed in ‘One Word More’ to pursue his own style.

The speaker admits that poetry – probably specifically Browning’s kind of poetry with its realistic portrayal of men and women – is a substitute for ‘the finer element’ (59) of heaven, or for EBB’s comparatively idealist poetry. Yet the triple insistence that poetry is the domain of ‘passion and thought’ (47, 49, 53-4) emphasises that, though less pure, it is able to encompass such a dichotomy as heart / head. Browning as an amphibian may enjoy the broader experience of both heaven and earth, whereas EBB – ‘a creature which had the choice / Of the land once’ (31-2) – is limited to one realm only. Aristophanes in *Aristophanes’ Apology* makes the same point about Euripides, who sees the world through his lofty, but restricted, perspective of ‘High and Right’ (5119) and only ‘knows one phase of life’ (5134), while Aristophanes himself can adopt various perspectives.³⁶ Bearing in mind Browning’s ideal of the fusion within a single author of the subjective poet who sees ‘what God sees’ and the objective poet who ‘chooses to deal with the doings of men’ (‘Essay on Shelley’ 1002 and 1003), it is significant that in ‘Amphibian’ he claims to occupy this intermediary position, which in *R&B* was still the preserve of the ‘half angel and half bird’ (I, 1391), EBB. Here, however, he merely echoes EBB’s own evaluation of his poetry:

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 – You can deal both with abstract *thought*, & with human *passion* in the most passionate sense. Thus, you have an immense grasp in Art; & no one at all accustomed to consider the usual forms of it, could help regarding with reverence & gladness the gradual expansion of your powers. (15 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 26, my emphasis)³⁷

This self-conceptualisation as the reconciler of opposites is pursued in *Aristophanes’ Apology*, when Aristophanes takes up Socrates’ idea from the end of the *Symposium* of the superior ‘imaginary Third’ (5140) dramatist who combines comedy and tragedy. This man, who will be ‘born – in the Tin-islands’ (5146), i.e. Britain, must be Shakespeare, with whom Browning so frequently identifies (see Chapter IV.4).³⁸

³⁶ Aristophanes’ metaphor of the game of *kottabos* is a variation of the colour wheel metaphor in *R&B* (I, 1348-78).

³⁷ Thomas Collins is of the opinion that much of the lexis of the ‘Essay on Shelley’ is inspired by EBB’s letters in the courtship correspondence (private communication to the author). Cf. another remark on Browning’s double vision in her letter of 19 August 1845 (*Corr.* 11: 37).

³⁸ A very similar self-definition as a third term, this time on a religious level, appears in the ‘Epilogue’ to *Dramatis Personae*. Its third speaker who quite obviously voices Browning’s position, offers his personal faith as a compromise between David’s belief in divine presence in the world and Renan’s

Even though the enounced acknowledges the superiority of heaven over the earthly state of writing poetry, the confident declaration

‘They fare
Scarce better, they need not scorn
Our sea, who live in the air!’ (50-2)

and the extended praise of the security of the firm land in the four last stanzas insinuate that the compromise of swimming may be of equal value to the heavenly state.³⁹ The only imperative of the poem, ‘(confess!)’ (70), which reveals belatedly that the utterance is dramatic, urges an addressee to accept the speaker’s view as a fact. The poem thus becomes Browning’s most explicit repudiation of EBB’s model. The use of pronouns confirms that he has reached his most independent stance: instead of being addressed to his dead wife, which was possible in *R&B*, the utterance refers to her in the (absent) third person. In stanzas ix-xii, the first person pronoun is replaced by the impersonal ‘one’, which effaces his direct relationship with her and suggests a detached self-observation. Stanza xiv switches to the first person plural, which gives the claims he makes a more general validity and widens the cleft between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Moreover, the situation in which she observes the speaker is presented not as a factual statement but in hypothetical ‘if’ clauses.

Yet, as in the other poems, Browning cannot sustain his independence throughout the entire text. In the last stanza, the speaker’s own evaluation of his compromise is superseded by his wondering how it will be judged by EBB and whether she will care to watch him at all. The mere fact that he wants to know her opinion reveals that he still depends on her. This continuing dilemma is a result of his conflicting strategies for self-conceptualisation. In his analysis of the self-fashioning of the Renaissance authors, Stephen Greenblatt posits two opposed entities as necessary ‘governing conditions’: an ‘authority situated at least partially outside the self’ to which the self submits, and an ‘alien’ in relation to which the self-fashioning is achieved (9-

regretful disbelief. However, the value of the third term is parodied by ‘Tertium Quid’ in *R&B*, whose authority and motivations are very doubtful.

³⁹ The ‘Prologue’ to *Pacchiarotto* (1876) contains an interesting rewriting of ‘Amphibian’, which conveys EBB’s superiority more convincingly: the speaker Browning is situated outside a house in which EBB is enclosed. Yet he paradoxically describes not her but himself as a ‘prison-bird’ (19) fettered by earthly life, whereas EBB is portrayed as a creative subjective poet, as a soul singing to itself in its house – but without the negative, solipsistic connotations of Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’. Browning is not only literally surrounded by living men, but also lives among them in the sense that they are his subject material. Only his poetry – albeit rough ‘storm-notes’ (20) – allows him to transcend his confinement and to ‘soar free’ (22).

10). This is exactly Browning's case, only he accords EBB a contradictory double function: on the one hand, she occupies a higher level of observation – stressed by the angel metaphor for her in three poems – which gives her the authority to judge him and forces him to base his self-conceptualisation on her observation of him. On the other hand, she is also the point of reference from which he needs to distinguish himself in order to define his distinctive identity. Situating her both on an equal level and in a higher category traps him in an *impasse*, which he could only avoid if he chose two different points of reference. As long as he does not relieve her of one of her functions, he cannot achieve a stable self-definition. Through 'Amphibian', Browning does make a first effort to demote EBB from her superiority, but he cannot sustain it.

The epilogue to *Fifine at the Fair*, 'The Householder' is a surreal fictional monologue with allusions to Browning's private life, i.e. a distorted self-observation. It pursues the same aim as 'Amphibian' with a more effective strategy. The level of the enounced seems to agree with EBB insofar as it builds on her spiritualist premise that communication with the dead is possible, and expresses the speaker's repentance and submission since the wife's spirit has the last word.⁴⁰ But this is only a façade because, as in the case of the false medium Mr Sludge, the level of the enunciation shows that Browning controls the dialogue with the dead by enclosing it in a narrative, and he invents the dream vision and her forgiving direct speech. In her rhetorical question "“And was I so better off up there?”" (24), he makes her deny the supremacy of her unworldly orientation. This reminds us that the inclusion of EBB in his poems always gives Browning the possibility to assert power over her, especially after her death. He can shape his fictional character 'EBB' according to his wishes – including his favourite image of her as a dominant model – because there is no other voice in or outside the poem which would seriously contradict this construction. Nina Auerbach might be going too far when she claims that he only resuscitates her to have the satisfaction of making her one of his creatures (173), but the device certainly does reinforce his identity as a self-confident artist.

⁴⁰ The dialogic structure is also a return to Browning's initial inspiration for the dramatic monologue through Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations of Literary Men and Statesmen*.

II.6. 'To Edward FitzGerald'

The emphasis on an insoluble opposition in *Fifine at the Fair* is not Browning's last word on their respective poetics. If there is no dialogue with EBB in 'To Edward FitzGerald', it is because FitzGerald has intruded on the couple's dialogue, usurped the second person and forced her into the third person. The poem enacts the effort to recover the disturbed unison with EBB through a particularly strong subjectivity and identification with her.

Written on 8 July 1889, five months before his death, the poem is virtually Browning's final word on his relationship with EBB; it is at the same time the most unguardedly personal of all his poems. It is so embedded in the biographical context that critics – with the notable exception of Karlin (*Hatreds* 25-32) – usually disregard the poem's status as a literary text and prefer not to discuss it.⁴¹ Occasioned by his reading of FitzGerald's remark: 'Mrs Browning's Death is rather a relief to me, I must say: no more Aurora Leighs, thank God![...]' (Wright 280), it was composed the next day as an immediate response to the – already deceased – FitzGerald. As with many occasional poems, Browning did not give the text the official status of a work of art by including it in a collection, although the publication of *Asolando* was imminent. Instead, he sent it as a public reply to the *Athenaeum*. In a letter to Emily Tennyson, he defended the violent hatred in his poem as adapted to the mode of FitzGerald's insult: '[...] if the blow I received was thoughtlessly dealt, my counter-blow was quite as unpremeditated –' (21 July 1889, Ricks 464).

Nevertheless, the text is too artistic for a spontaneous outburst crammed into verse. Karlin argues here an ironic displacement of pathos onto hatred through the resonance with the situation in Milton's 'Methought I saw my late espoused saint...' and Browning's own repeated reference to the dead wife's return in the Alcestis myth following EBB's death (*Hatreds* 31). The enunciation is structured in such a way that the reader can observe the speaker's motivations, and it therefore justifies the drastic position taken on the level of the enounced. The first sestet contains a dramatic narrative of Browning's discovery. Detailing all stages of the experience, it gives the reader time to sympathise with the state of mind of the unsuspecting speaker. Suspense is increased by parentheses which delay the cause of his exasperation until the very last

⁴¹ Orr omits it from the second edition of her *Handbook*, and Griffin and Minchin do not cite it.

word of the sestet (““thanked God my wife was dead”). After this shock, the tone in the second sestet becomes gradually more aggressive. It progresses from initial irony in ‘good Fitz’ – an allusion to Tennyson’s complimentary poem ‘To E. FitzGerald’ (1885) – and ‘return your thanks’ to outright hatred, culminating in a paradoxical conceit which turns spitting – an extremely contemptuous physical assault – into a glorification. This hate is excused by the strong emotion, which is conveyed in the alliteration of harsh consonants (‘Kicking...common...curs’, 9, ‘greeting...grace’, 10) or in the onomatopoeic ‘spit...Spitting’ (11-12). Moreover, the central position of the word ‘dead’ at the end of the first and the beginning of the second sestet as well as the mouth’s double function – kissing and spitting – emphasise that grief for the beloved is the cause of Browning’s hatred.

The carefully created impression of authentic spontaneity is not just a move to forestall criticism; it also reveals Browning’s effort to fulfil EBB’s ideal of the personal subjective utterance, and this is obviously how he wanted the text to be perceived by the Tennysons. Both the speaker’s interpretation of FitzGerald’s remark and the poem’s form follow this poetic principle. As the sonnet form was conventionally expected to express the poet-speaker’s feelings, Browning usually avoided the sonnet form (see Chapter IV.3); but this twelve-line poem may be termed a curtailed sonnet with the octave shortened to another sestet, since it shares the sonnet’s characteristically surprising closure, its formal elaboration and the personal mode. When the speaker interprets FitzGerald’s comment, which is obviously meant to refer to poetry by women in general and not to EBB’s private personality – lines 5 and 6 stress that FitzGerald did not know her –, he voices her idea that private self and poetry are one.

The speaker is all the more outraged at Fitzgerald’s insult because he sees his own and EBB’s identity as fused. How strongly the real Browning identified with his wife is suggested by the inadvertent slippage from the feminine gender form ‘herself’ to the masculine ‘his’ in his letter about the incident to his son, which is pointed out by Karlin (*Hatreds* 27):

[...] all I know is that the fellow insulted one unable to defend herself – who yet is able to express his loathing for such a scamp. (13 July 1889, Hood 312)

In the enunciation of the poem, tokens of this fusion of identities abound. The text itself acts as a link connecting the first and the last words, ‘I’ and ‘Hers’. Besides, as lovers

they are fused into one through the kiss as the emblem of the perfect moment of the lovers' union. The general principle behind Browning's defence of his wife is not a traditional paternalistic code of honour which considers husband and wife as one because marriage has made her his property and insulting her thus equals insulting the husband's honour. On the contrary, Browning presents himself again in an unequal centre-periphery relationship, highlighted by the capitalisation of 'Her'. He is her extension, since he derives his authority to punish FitzGerald from the act of touching her sanctifying lips. Another indication of this is that despite the change of focus from himself in the first sestet to 'Her' in the second – in which the first person pronoun does not even appear any more – the speaker's emotional involvement increases in the second half. Once more the letter to Lady Tennyson complements the poem. Browning writes that, when opening the book,

I had fully expected to be amused [...] – to be amused by the customary treatment of Browning, "the unintelligible", "unreadable", "unindurable" and so forth: and seeing that such skits have, in a way, diverted me for half a century, they can but little discompose me now-a-days. (Ricks 464)

Browning can read about his own public reputation as a poet with amused detachment but feels extremely hurt when EBB is attacked.

Taken together, the impression which Browning gives of a very self-confident speaker on the level of the enounced jars with his implicit self-definition as an adjunct to EBB as it appears in the enunciation. The speaker can only be so emphatically assertive and personal because the poem is actually not about Browning's separate identity but about EBB. Although the letters in relation to the incident prove that he for once directly converts personal experience into poetry, the poem is yet another instance of his tactic of eclipsing his self and diverting attention to her at the point when he seems to reveal himself most – even if in this case the author may be less aware of this than in other poems. Whereas in all of the other poems discussed in this chapter Browning constitutes his identity through his role as a poet – and ultimately as a poet with a style definitively distinct from that of EBB –, he here defines himself exclusively through his beloved. Only his characteristically vigorous language remains as a hint of his individuality. Leaving aside the insult to the person EBB, one reason for this exception is certainly the provocative nature of FitzGerald's remark, which called for a firm stance in defence of the poet EBB and did not leave any space for the exposure of aesthetic disagreements between the Brownings.

In the context of the poems on EBB, the approach employed here can also be seen as a final effort to resolve the double-bind relationship with her. All of the foregoing poems waver between two alternatives: they either struggle against her subjective, self-expressive poetry on one or both of the textual levels, or they avoid a confrontation of the two opposed poetics through a submissive shift of focus onto her. In the two earliest poems, this impossibility of reconciling both tendencies is so prominent that it is reflected in the disjointed structure of the text, and even the pivotal 'One Word More' is not free from these tensions. Whereas these three poems try to resolve the conflict by defining Browning's stance, the increased distance after her death makes it possible to rethink *her* position. This leads to greater homogeneity in the later poems considered: the prologue and epilogue to *Fifine at the Fair* stress the insuperable difference and question EBB's superiority, while 'O lyric Love...' retains her as a model and reduces oppositions. The close identification with the person EBB in 'To Edward FitzGerald' is an even more rigorous solution than 'O lyric Love...', which is balanced by a very confident assertion of Browning's individual poetic character throughout his two monologues in *R&B*. Maintaining EBB as the ideal without substituting a new opponent is, however, the wrong choice. As a result, despite its much undervalued artistic construction, 'To Edward FitzGerald' is the only poem analysed in this chapter in which Browning does not succeed in profiling himself as a distinctive poet.

To be at his most fruitful as a poet, Browning must not emulate another. His early experimentation with poetry in the style of Byron and Shelley had already taught him the lesson that he needed to define his individual stance through a constructive dialogue with an opponent. This chapter has shown how he applies this lesson to his confrontation with EBB. He exploits the tension between her subjectivity and his own objectivity within the poem, first to map out his difference from EBB and then to assert this difference. The process through which this is effected is conducive to Browning's self-conceptualisation, since it allows him to achieve a conscious self-definition by means of a dynamic dialectical engagement. 'To Edward FitzGerald' is thus not the anticipated endpoint of his developing attitude towards the poet EBB; but it is rather an understandable aberration which obviates rather than addresses the problem that the other poems about her had, with varying degrees of conviction, sought to resolve.

III. SELF-OBSERVATION AS HETERO-OBSERVATION

The previous chapter has shown how associating the poetics of self-expression with another poet, EBB, helps Browning to observe his own engagement with this mode. The more he can distance himself from the aspect of his self which he is observing, the easier it becomes to arrive at a clear self-observation. The furthest step towards detachment, and the exercise which permits the sharpest self-observation, is hetero-observation, i.e. dividing the observer and the observed into two distinct characters. This can either mean that Browning retains the role of the observer and projects aspects of his identity onto surrogate selves, or it can mean that he makes himself the object of observation and delegates the task of observing to his speakers. Browning uses variations of both possibilities. In order to demonstrate the diversity of his techniques of self-observation through hetero-observation, this chapter will include poems which are not *in propria persona* but are crucial for his self-presentation within the literary text. I will start with the most oblique observations of, first, personal experience, and then his poetics, where the reader might not even be aware that the author is referring to himself rather than to a fictional character. I will then turn to poems in which the self-reference is increasingly obvious and Browning appears in the role of the observed, and end with two poems in which he poses as an external observer of both himself and the public who observe him.

III.1. The Fictionalisation of Personal Experience

In order to discover how Browning seeks to present himself in his poetry, I will approach the issue by analysing a few poems which are based on personal experience, but from which he deliberately eliminates the proof of their autobiographical origin, or which are labelled as dramatic monologues despite their obvious parallel with Browning the man. We have to ask why he chooses to dissociate himself from certain kinds of experience and why the self-reference is overt in other cases.

Let us first briefly consider 'A Face', which was originally conceived as an untitled occasional poem on Coventry Patmore's first wife Emily – '(the *First Angel* of

his House)', as Browning ironically comments on a transcript –¹ and written in her album on 11 October 1852. By publishing it in *Dramatis Personae* (1864), he turns a poem in his own voice, intended for a specific addressee and private circulation, into a public text. Except for the addition of the title, he does not make any significant changes to adapt the poem to its new place in a collection of dramatic monologues, although the situation of utterance is relatively 'undramatic'. Since there is no hint that the poem portrays a real person and it appears in the new context as a companion piece to 'A Likeness', which is spoken by a fictional speaker, the uninitiated reader must take 'A Face' for a dramatic monologue which offers a realistic description of the woman's face as the speaker imagines it in a painting.

The clue to the purpose of this 'literary recycling' lies in the re-contextualisation of the poem. The juxtaposition with 'A Likeness' shifts the focus from the addressee to the speaker's creation of the imaginary painting of her and to the issue of the relation between a portrait and the person it depicts. 'A Likeness' already contains two contrasting sections on the portraits of real women versus the etching of a fictional woman, stressing the viewer's eagerness to access the sitter's self through the painting. 'A Face' contributes to the exploration of this theme from multiple perspectives by presenting the reverse process of converting the woman into a work of art. It gives a valuable insight into Browning's method of gathering subject material: at least in the case of poems which are not highly personal, he is ready to draw on his own experience as a resource for poetic subjects.

In contrast, the poetic treatment of a very painful personal experience requires a more careful distancing. 'May and Death' was probably written shortly after the death of Browning's cousin James Silverthorne in May 1852. Yet it was not published in *Men and Women* of 1855 but only in *The Keepsake* of 1857 and in *Dramatis Personae* (1864). If Browning had already written the text before 1855, the delay in publication would suggest that he felt uncomfortable about including an – albeit disguised – poem on such an intimate subject without a temporal distance. And if he wrote it only shortly before its publication, this might indicate that he needed time to confront the experience in writing. Betty Miller (152) quotes a letter to Furnivall in which Browning explains why he did not attempt an artistic expression of his grief over the deaths of his mother

¹ MS 1852b in the Armstrong Browning Library, Waco, Texas.

and wife, the two most important personal relations in his life: '[...] in the two or three great sorrows of my life it [i.e. expression through poetry] has been the last thing that occurred to me' (17 September 1883, Peterson *Trumpeter* 76-7). However, he did write an elegy on the death of his cousin and childhood friend, with whom, as described in 'May and Death', he rambled through Dulwich Wood (Maynard 66), who gave him his first copy of Shelley's poems and who was also a witness at the Brownings' wedding.

Despite its brevity, the twenty-line poem incorporates many characteristics of the pastoral monody, such as the wish that all nature join in mourning and the pathetic fallacy this implies, or the contrast between the rebirth of nature in Spring and man's irrevocable death. The peachwort alludes to Adonis's metamorphosis as evoked in Bion's 'Lament for Adonis', where his drops of blood turn into flowers. Legend describes the red spots of the peachwort as the traces of Christ's blood, permitting the conventional reinterpretation of the polytheistic cult of vegetation deities in Christian terms. This plant, whose red spot in Browning's poem is a drop which 'comes from [the speaker's] heart' (20) and not the deceased, is also the point of intersection at which the traditional identification of mourner and mourned takes place.

These generic elements are not presented in the archaic, pastoral guise of Shelley's 'Adonais' or Arnold's 'Thyrsis' with their shepherds and reed flutes. There is no indication that the setting is a contemporary one, but the substitution of the common first name 'Charles' for 'James' clearly distinguishes the poem from the conventional elegy, which derives proper names from the Greek pastoral. When they are used, it is always perfectly clear whom they represent – usually a famous dead poet – and it is understood that the author speaks the dirge *in propria persona*. The choice of 'Charles' makes the utterance – like 'A Face' – sound like a realistic dramatic monologue, especially since the uninitiated contemporary reader would not have known about Silverthorne. Besides, since he had previously called the childhood friend in 'Italy in England' (first published in 1845) 'Charles', the name had already assumed the value of a generic name for the friend in Browning's poetry.²

The poem fulfils two contrasting functions. Firstly, Browning can verbalise his grief, but projecting his feelings onto a fictional character protects him from revealing

² In contrast, the decision not to change the name Alfred (Domett) in 'The Guardian-Angel' highlights Browning's effort to reveal his personal situation in that poem.

himself too intimately. Only the stress on the month of May – Browning’s birth-month, which also appears as a personal signature in *Sordello* (II, 296) and ‘Of Pacchiarotto’ (462 and 572) – points to the autobiographical import. At the same time, he can state his rejection of subjective poetry by recasting one of the most self-expressive poetic subgenres into as objective a mould as possible. This is achieved not only through the realistic mode of the utterance, which contrasts with the formal language of traditional elegy. Whereas the speakers of the latter comment on their identity as poets and indulge in long hyperbolic lamentations before the final consolation, Browning does not identify his speaker as a poet but makes him a self-consciously critical observer of his lament. Already in the fifth line he checks his dirge and condemns his wish that spring had died with the mourned one as ‘A foolish thought, and worse, perhaps!’, thereby hinting at a criticism of the genre’s excessiveness. Although successful as an elegiac dramatic monologue and a safely disguised outlet for personal grief, ‘May and Death’ thus expresses the author’s underlying disapproval of such a subjective, artificial genre.

Browning tackles the elegy once more and on a grander scale in *La Saisiaz* (1878), but here, ironically, the utterance is motivated by his doubt over the central premise of Christian elegy, the belief in life after death. Even though nature plays an important role in the poem, it does not ‘support the death-rebirth circle’ of traditional elegy (King 211). Nevertheless, *La Saisiaz* follows the convention quite closely. Speaking in his own voice, Browning goes through extensive reflections about immanence and transcendence, and he uses the death of a friend as an opportunity for discussing his stance as a poet. Yet even *La Saisiaz* holds something back. Officially the elegy for his friend Annie Egerton Smith, it is in fact the elegy he never wrote for EBB and elaborates on questions of faith which he had previously touched upon in relation to her death (see Chapter V.4). Although the poem is definitely more personal than ‘May and Death’, Browning still prefers to distance his most painful encounter with death through displacing it onto another person to whom he is less intimately related. The potential for emotional outbursts is carefully limited by the unconventional debate structure and the Cartesian reasoning. Moreover, the analysis of the poem’s coda (see Chapter V.4.2) will show the question of converting his reflections into poetry to be just as important as the self-expression in the main part.

In contrast to the later *La Saisiaz*, in which Browning openly admits the shortcomings of his intuitive faith, the reluctance to expose his religious convictions to criticism seems to be the underlying motive for the ambiguity about the speaker's identity in 'Christmas-Eve' (1850). The poem itself bears no indication that the speaker is not Browning, but in the companion piece 'Easter-Day' he is referred to as 'Our friend' (375). The 'Christmas-Eve' speaker thus seems to be fictional, whereas the speaker of 'Easter-Day' could either be another fictional character or Browning himself. Another possibility is that 'Christmas-Eve' is indeed Browning's utterance and that in 'Easter-Day' a fictional speaker comments on him. The range of potential attributions leads to the conclusion that the focus on the speaker's process of thought and its artistic mediation serves the purpose of diverting attention from the real Browning. The same applies to many dramatic monologues about love, such as 'By the Fire-Side' or 'A Lovers' Quarrel', which seem to be inspired by Browning's personal experience but which omit biographical references and foreground the speaker's thought process. It thus appears that Browning does occasionally use poems as outlets for his intimate emotions under the protection of a fictional dramatic speaker; but this self-expression always remains subordinate to the principle of the dramatic monologue and the critical observation of psychology and literary conventions, in other words private concerns are less important than aesthetic ones.

The same pattern, though in a more complex form, can be seen in two fictionalised observations of Browning's *poetic* development. Like 'Christmas-Eve', 'Time's Revenges' (1845) appears at first sight to be in his own voice. The opening contains autobiographical allusions, such as the speaker's lack of recognition as a writer or his headaches, and the supportive friend 'over the sea' (1) must be Domett in New Zealand, to whom Browning refers thus in a letter to EBB of 11 February 1845 (*Corr.* 10: 69). 'Time's Revenges' is more closely inspired by Browning's experience than the fanciful 'Waring', whose eponymous hero Browning's and Domett's mutual friend Joseph Arnould recognised as 'a fancy portrait' of Domett when writing to the latter (Kenyon *Browning and Domett* 62) and which has two clearly fictional speakers.³ It seems that in 'Time's Revenges' Browning draws on those facts in his biography which are elements of the type of the unrecognised Romantic genius, as if to determine

³ For an analysis of Domett and Waring as an imaginative self-projections and vehicles for Browning's ironic reflection on his situation as a poet without an audience, see McCarthy (377-82).

whether he fits into that mould. Up to line 28, this self-projection seems to work, and the poem reads like a credible account of Browning's situation.

From line 29 onwards, however, the speaker's self-portrayal shifts to that of a poor bohemian poet in his freezing garret. While the speaker in the enounced does not call the *cliché* into question, the author distances himself from it through ironic exaggerations in the enunciation. Three years before the composition of this poem, Browning had in the 'Essay on Chatterton' still taken sides with a poet who had indeed died in a garret, and whom the Romantics cherished and celebrated as their precursor. By suddenly introducing a distance here between the enounced and the enunciation, which is maintained throughout the rest of the text, the author now indicates that he no longer identifies with that stereotype.⁴ The second paragraph not only develops into a parody; it also introduces a new theme, which is clearly no longer related to Browning's personal situation. The poet's unrequited love for a cruel worldly lady is a conventional *motif* in melodrama and the romance. The speaker is self-conscious enough to see that he strives to conform to *clichés*. In the enounced, he despairs because he cannot master his passion; but the enunciation undermines his self-conceptualisation: the accumulation of hyperbolic diction in this paragraph, which contrasts with the subdued seriousness of the first, is inappropriate in the tragic situation of someone who suffers the acute physical and mental pain which the speaker describes. Moreover, the massing of imperatives towards the end, which mark the utterance as a dramatic monologue, suggest that the speaker is attempting a moving self-dramatisation before an audience. The abrupt change from anguish to relative indifference in the final two lines also calls his sincerity into doubt:

There may be a Heaven; there must be a Hell;
Meantime, there is our Earth here – well! (67-8)

The development of the poem suggests that it can be read as a medium for Browning's retrospective observation of his changing self-conceptualisation as an artist. Its progression from hidden autobiography and Romanticism to an anti-Romantic dramatic monologue with an ironically detached author parallels the re-shaping of

⁴ Browning's portrayal of the garret *painter*, who covers his walls with frescoes, reveals the same evolution. In 'Waring' (1842), he is still referred to with a mixture of satire and admiration, but Pacchiarotto, who exchanges the lofty garret for a grotto, is relentlessly satirised. Surprisingly, this negative change in attitude occurred after Browning's son Pen had decided to become a painter.

artistic identity which Browning underwent in the early 1840s. The psychology of the speaker as he is portrayed in the second part is a further indication that the text is a dramatic monologue, since it presents a variation of the theme of pathological submission to the beloved in 'Porphyria'. The substitution of the Romantic model by the model of one of his own first two dramatic monologues appears to vindicate Browning's confidence in that move, while the parodying reprise of his own poem conveys his ironic detachment from his own poetic mode.

The text also encourages the reader to observe himself. The surprising development of the poem makes him reflect on his principles of reception. Although a contemporary reader would not notice the autobiographical elements in the first paragraph, he would initially assume the utterance to be the author's own and to be reliable. The second paragraph shows this identification of speaker and author to be deceptive and invites the reader to engage in a critical second order observation of the speaker's motives and limitations, even if he is a poet. Through this he will realise that the Romantic poet in the garret is just a constructed pose and that he must not accept it uncritically. The text thus warns the reader against the convention of the straightforwardly self-exposing poem and its stereotypes in favour of the principle of second order observation, urging him to take the step which Browning as a poet has already taken. The suggested parallel between poet and reader here is apposite since Browning ideally conceives of poet and reader as being on equal terms, as his reference to the reader's 'co-operating fancy' in the preface to *Paracelsus* and the concept of poet and reader as brothers in *Sordello* (V, 605) imply.

Another coded re-enactment of different stages in Browning's poetic development occurs through the insertion of an early poem into a later work.⁵ The thirty lines of 'Still ailing, wind?...' were first published under the heading 'Lines' and signed 'Z' –Browning's habitual pseudonym – in the *Monthly Repository* of May 1836. This lyric, which contains no indication of a dramatic speaker, is a typical case of Romantic pathetic fallacy. The speaker initially attributes his melancholy feelings and need for their expression to the wind, but the roles of wind and speaker, the sufferer

⁵ Another instance of self-quotation is the 'Spring Song', which was first published separately in *The New Amphion* in 1886. One year later, Browning made it the conclusion to the *Parleying* 'With Gerard de Lairese'. The speaker 'Browning' distances himself from the subjective lyric by introducing it as 'rhyme / Such as one makes now' (421-2) and using the generic 'a man' to refer to the poet, but at the same time the absence of quotation marks may hint at his identification with the lyric.

and the agency venting the suffering, turn out to be interchangeable. The poem closes on the egotistical question of whether the wind only blows to comfort the speaker in his depression. The speaker is at no point able to take the stance of a critical second order observation of how he endows the wind with meaning. In the monologue sequence 'James Lee's Wife' in *Dramatis Personae* (1864), the 'Lines' reappear in section VI 'Reading a Book, Under the Cliff' as a quotation from a book on which James Lee's wife comments. Browning's retrospective observation of his 23-year-old self is thus distanced through a fictional speaker and the anonymity of the poet, who is vaguely referred to as 'some young man' (182). Since the publication in the *Monthly Repository* was under a pseudonym, the general public would not have been aware of the personal implications, so that the 'Lines' very probably appeared to readers as a deliberate parody of Romantic egotism.

The fictional monologue speaker acts temporarily as the author's mouthpiece. In the passage immediately following the quotation, she points out the young poet's blind spots, i.e. the limitations which the mature Browning apprehends during his retrospective self-observation. But as in the case of 'Time's Revenges', the look back at Browning's former self is subordinate to the purpose of the monologue, i.e. the lyric highlights an aspect of the wife's character.⁶ Later on in the section, she will lose the authority of the authorial mouthpiece and become once more a normal character whose own biased point of view is exposed. In her second order observation of the young poet, she criticises his way of perceiving everything as 'Merely examples for his sake' (185), but it does not occur to her that she, too, brings her subjective preoccupations into her monologues, where she sees the landscape in relation to the state of her marriage. And in section IV itself, when she claims to understand what the wind says, she, like the young poet, endows it with a significance which suits her own purpose. The use of the same stanza form for both the lyric and the wife's response to it is an indication on the level of the enunciation that she and the young poet share the same limitation.

The points which Browning makes in his fictionalised self-observation here bear a similarity to John Stuart Mill's summarising commentary in his copy of *Pauline* in

⁶ The interest of the passage, independent of its autobiographical import, is confirmed by the fact that section VI was one of the three texts which Browning's American editor Fields selected to be published in the *Atlantic Monthly* a few days before the publication of *Dramatis Personae*.

1833, the most telling critique of Browning's early Romantic egotism. Both Mill and James Lee's wife open by grudgingly conceding visionary powers to the young poet. Mill starts 'With considerable poetic powers, [...]', whereas the wife criticises the arrogance of the 'young man's pride / Of power to see' (182-3). Mill has two main points of criticism, which I will consider in reverse order. His second point is that Browning claims a knowledge that is not based on personal experience. Mill tempers his overall praise for the convincing 'psychological history' of the speaker of *Pauline* by saying it is evident that the poet has not yet attained the final stage of the development he describes. The mature Browning agreed with Mill on the superiority of experience over the poet's imaginative vision of it. He made it a recurring theme of his poetry, as in 'In a Balcony', 'The Last Ride Together' or 'Cleon'. This is also the reason why the wife disapproves of the young poet. In her reinterpretation of the wind's message, she states that a mature mind is necessary to understand its point about mutability (197-201).

So, after resisting Mill by penning a self-justifying reply in Mill's copy of *Pauline*, Browning belatedly does acknowledge his criticism in 'James Lee's Wife'. However, this self-criticism is attenuated by several factors. It takes him over thirty years to face the issue, and when he finally does so, it is veiled from the public's view by the fictionality of the characters and the anonymity of the 'Lines'. Moreover, Browning chooses not to respond to Mill's first point of criticism, in which the character of Pauline is judged to be utterly inconsistent, with the implication that the entire design of the poem is seriously flawed. He only takes up Mill's less severe second point. Since Mill attributes the defect here to the poet's youth, it is excusable and almost naturally amended by time. Accordingly, Browning exaggerates his youth in later references to the poem. In a letter of 26 February 1845 to EBB, he alludes to *Pauline* apologetically as 'the little book I first printed when a boy' (*Corr.* 10: 99), although he was twenty at the time, and when EBB later insists that she wants to see the poem, he calls it 'not boylike' (15 January 1846, *Corr.* 11: 317).⁷ Browning's misrepresentation of Mill's commentary in his own favour also appears in the letter to

⁷ This apparent contradiction might be an intertextual reference to Keats's preface to *Endymion*, in which he apologises for the 'great inexperience, immaturity' of his 'feverish attempt', while making a distinction between, on the one hand, the boy's and the mature man's healthy imagination and, on the other hand, adolescence, when 'the soul is in a ferment', the period of life during which he composed *Endymion*. Browning's 'not boylike' would thus mean that *Pauline* is an adolescent work.

EBB of 26 February 1845, where he misquotes Mill's reference to the young poet's 'more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being' as 'a deeper self-consciousness than I ever knew in a sane human being', and in a letter of 24 May 1845, in which he states that he 'had a certain faculty of self-consciousness, years, years ago, at which John Mill wondered, and which ought to be improved by this time, if constant use helps at all' (*Corr.* 10: 234). Although Browning faces Mill's criticism in both the courtship correspondence and 'James Lee's Wife', he does so only selectively. The next section will show that this poem is not the only one in which he lets himself off lightly by blaming defects on his youth or not reflecting the full severity of his reviews.

III.2. Fictional Characters Observing Browning

A step towards a less oblique self-observation is identifying either the observer or the observed as 'Browning'. Of these two possibilities, the observation by other characters is more distanced because Browning does not have to speak out, and the reader does not gain direct access to his self. As in the dramatic monologue, we can expect the focus here to be on the way in which the speaker perceives the object of his observation, thereby diverting our attention from the second order observation of Browning to the speaker as observer. We come close to this situation in the monologue 'How It Strikes A Contemporary', in which the enounced verbalises not the author's but the public's idea of the poet of Valladolid. In such a poem, the author's stance can only be inferred from the way in which the enunciation characterises or discredits the speaker and thereby influences how the reader evaluates the speaker's conceptualisation of the poet.

There are three instances of fictional characters commenting on Browning's reputation as a poet from three different periods, which allow us to retrace in some measure the evolution of his style. The first occurs in 1841 in a digression in *Pippa Passes* (I, 283-304), where a group of art students talk about an absent friend, who is a poet. At this early stage of his career, Browning's name does not yet appear in the text. Indeed, in giving the poet the fictional name 'Giovacchino' in the 1849 version of the text, Browning disguises the self-reference even more. Nevertheless, the allusions to reviews of his recent works are so obvious that – in contrast to the poems analysed

above – the reader is more likely to notice the self-observation. One of the students sneers:

The poet's away – never having much meant to be here, moonstrike him! He was in love with himself, and had a fair prospect of thriving in his suit, when suddenly a woman fell in love with him too, and out of pure jealousy, he takes himself off to Trieste, immortal poem and all – whereto is this prophetic epitaph appended already, as Bluphocks assured me: – *'The author on the author. Here so and so, the mammoth, lies, Fouled to death by butterflies.'* His own fault, the simpleton! Instead of cramp couplets, each like a knife in your entrails, he should write, says Bluphocks, both classically and intelligibly. – *Aesculapius, an epic. Catalogue of the drugs: – Hebe's plaister – One strip Cools your lip; Phoebus' emulsion – One bottle Clears your throttle; Mercury's bolus – One box Cures...* (I, 283-98)

The speaker comments on both the content and form of Browning's poetry. With regard to the content, the poet who 'was in love with himself' is an acknowledgement of Browning's Romantic egotism which was severely criticised, for instance by Mill's censure of the 'morbid self-consciousness' in *Pauline*. The phrase 'Here so and so [...] lies' and the epic ambition echo one of Browning's letters to Macready, in which he playfully announces: '[...] tomorrow will I betimes break new ground with So & So – an epic in so many books' (9 August 1840, *Corr.* 4: 295). Self-parody is surely intended, since by the time Browning writes this, he has already turned his back on his youthful Romantic ideals and can look back at them with ironic detachment. This cannot be said of his obscure style, for which he was criticised throughout his career. The denigration of the poet's 'cramp couplets' and the recommendation to write 'both classically and intelligibly' is in line with the reviewers' critique of *Sordello*, which was written in couplets. It resonates in particular with Walter Savage Landor's comment on that poem, 'I only wish he would atticise a little' (Forster 428), meaning that Browning should imitate the classical Greek authors.

The passage is both an ironic admission and an attenuation of Browning's shortcomings, for it ridicules the speaker's own neo-classicist standards and thereby partially discredits his criticism of Browning alias Giovacchino. The work which the student recommends as a poetic model, *Aesculapius, an epic*, is a mock heroic imitation of a Homeric catalogue with wordplay on the names of Greek divinities or their attributes: the 'plaister' of Hebe, the goddess of youth, is a kiss; the 'emulsion' of Phoebus Apollo, the god of poetry and eloquence, is wine; and mercury was a treatment for syphilis, the 'pox', the suppressed rhyme which would complete the phrase '*One box Cures...*' (Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 2: 44). Besides, the student's

rhymes are hardly an improvement on the ‘cramp couplets’ which he dismisses so haughtily.

The student does not express his own judgement but reiterates the verdict of a certain Bluphocks. As Frederick F. Furnivall explains, ‘The name means *Blue-Fox*, and is a skit on the *Edinburgh Review*, which is bound in a cover of blue and fox’ (Berdoe *s.v.* ‘Bluphocks’). This makes the student a representative of the general public, a reader who uncritically adopts the reviewers’ opinion of the poet. His quoting of Bluphocks and the repetition of Bluphocks’s name underline the student’s slavish acceptance of this authority. Since the student is representative of the public, the passage compels the reader into an indirect self-observation. It thus fulfils a mirror function, inviting the reading public to reflect on their aesthetic criteria and the reviewers’ manipulation of them. Browning himself disappears behind the mirror which he is holding up, so that he escapes our direct observation – just as his *alter ego*, Giovacchino, is absent from the scene in which he is mentioned. The only view of him we are given is mediated through the biased perspective of his critics, and the focus is in the end less on Browning’s supposed self-criticism than on the criticism of his critics.

In ‘Time’s Revenges’, ‘James Lee’s Wife’ and *Pippa Passes*, where Browning looks back at his earlier Romantic self, he uses the dramatic utterance by a fictional character as a clear formal indication of his conversion to objective poetry. Yet even when the observation is carried out from a safe temporal distance, he avoids naming himself and finds ways of attenuating his self-criticism. This may indicate either that he does not wish to acknowledge his early mode in his new poetry – just as he disavows *Pauline* until in 1868 the fear of unauthorised editions gets the better of his shame – or that he still identifies enough with his former self to feel the need to protect his weaknesses from the public’s view.

When he refers to himself for the first time as an exclusively objective poet in ‘A Light Woman’, explicit self-reference does not carry the risk of exposure, since the text announces his poetic reorientation away from vulnerable subjectivity. Another reason for the self-reference by name here is that, in contrast to *Pippa Passes*, he considers himself in 1855 famous enough to broach the issue of his reputation directly. Probably addressing Browning throughout, the speaker of ‘A Light Woman’ ends his psychologically involved and slightly sordid love-triangle story with the conclusion: ‘And, Robert Browning, you writer of plays, / Here’s a subject made to your hand!’

(55-6) A. R. Jones suggests that in these lines Browning was either ‘making a note for his own benefit about a possible plot for a future play’ or that they were a ‘self-advertisement, inserted in the hope that the readers of his poems would be induced to buy his plays’ (306). These suggestions are not convincing, since Browning had by 1855 long abandoned drama for the dramatic monologue, and the lines hardly sound like a well thought-out advertisement for specific texts. Jones does not consider that the lines allow Browning to observe his reputation through the speaker as a representative reader. The speaker’s remark indicates either that the public has understood the distinctive subject matter and dramatic quality of Browning’s new poetry, of which ‘A Light Woman’ itself is an example, or that Browning’s reputation rests on his plays and that the public is not aware that he has switched to poetry. The speaker’s ironically detached observation of his own situation in the body of the poem is foremost in his mind, and his evaluation of Browning is so indeterminate that the reference seems to be mainly a signpost confirming the author’s turn away from Romanticism and his confidence in having attained a literary reputation.

The opening of the *Inn Album* (1875) reverts to the same satirical presentation of Browning’s public image as in *Pippa Passes*. The ‘older man’ verbalises the public’s view but takes an ironic distance from it. He reads out this quatrain from the inn’s visitors’ album:

“‘If a fellow can dine On rumpsteaks and port wine,
He needs not despair Of dining well here –”’ (14-15)

His comment

“‘Here!’ I myself could find a better rhyme!
That bard’s a Browning; he neglects the form:
But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense!’ (16-18)

summarises the view which the general public has of Browning in the 1870s. He offsets the perennial condemnation of Browning’s rough versification in the quoted doggerel with its slant rhyme against the poet’s rising popularity as a philosopher.⁸ Browning good-humouredly acknowledges his technical imperfections, but as in the other examples, the poem does not reflect the full hostility of the real reviews, and self-

⁸ See e.g. the verdict that Browning ‘thinks so much more of his substance than the form of what he says [...]’ (unsigned review of *Fifine at the Fair* in *The Spectator* of June 1872, Litzinger and Smalley 376). For comments on this self-referential passage by reviewers of *The Inn Album*, all of which agree with the ‘older man’, see King *et al.* (13: 284-5).

observation is less important than the critical second order observation of the way in which the public perceives him. Browning the man quietly enjoyed his popularity and did not discourage his growing standing as a moral philosopher and religious thinker, which culminated in the foundation of the Browning Society in 1881. But Browning the poet uses an exaggerated irony in this passage to ridicule the public's prejudices. The blatant triviality of the quatrain's content is a humorous reproach to those of Browning's admirers who want to read into his poetry a deeper philosophical meaning than it actually possesses, while being blind to his stylistic innovations.

The passage thus goes to the core of Browning's problematic relationship with his audience: even when he has finally attained a certain fame, he is still misunderstood by the majority of the public. Already in a letter of 11 February 1845, in which he replies to EBB's enquiry regarding his "sensitiveness to criticism", he makes this point:

[...] I have met with much more than I could have expected in this matter of kindly and prompt recognition. I never wanted a real set of good hearty praisers – and no bad reviewers.. I am quite content with my share. No – what I laughed at in my 'gentle audience' is a sad trick the real admirers have of admiring at the wrong place – enough to make an apostle swear! *That* does make me savage, – *never* the other kind of people [...] (*Corr.* 10: 71)

Browning undoubtedly does want to reshape his image, but since he chooses poetry as a medium to reform the reader's view of him, he is faced with the problem of how to get the reader to understand his difficult poetics without abandoning them in the act of explanation. The device of the fictional character commenting on his author in the three passages just analysed has the advantage of not violating his doctrine of impersonality. But as he denies himself a voice in the text which could spell out explicitly how he sees himself, Browning needs a highly sensitive reader. He relies on the readers' capacity to recognise themselves in the dramatic speakers and expects them to see that the focus is on the public's false perception of his art. However, the readers who can follow this circuitous path are probably those who appreciate Browning anyway, whereas the ordinary reader – if he ever reads these poems and does not merely reiterate the reviews like the student in *Pippa Passes* – will see these references to the author as little more than a humorous break in the fictional framework. Perhaps the inadequacy of this indirect method, in addition to Browning's growing anger about abusive reviews, was a factor which motivated the group of poems *in propria persona* in the *Pacchiarotto* volume, his next publication after the *Inn Album*. In these poems, which

will be analysed in the next chapter, Browning decides to speak out unambiguously and gets embroiled as a result in a conflict with his objective principles.

III.3. Browning as Observer

With 'Pambo' we return at last to utterances *in propria persona* and to the inverse of the cases considered in the previous section. Browning is now the observer of an *alter ego*. Published in 1883, this first self-reference in a short poem after *Pacchiarotto* continues the confrontation with his critics, but several devices make the self-observation oblique. Although it is the final poem in *Jocoseria* and thus a potential locus for authorial statements, the title's resemblance to the many eponymous titles in the collection disguises its personal character. Only the first and final stanzas are explicitly self-referential. The rest of the poem substitutes Pambo as the object of observation. It recounts an episode from Nathaniel Wanley's *The Wonders of the Little World* (1678), in which Pambo astonishes his professor by taking several months to learn the lesson of a single verse from the Bible.

Within the narrative, the speaker refrains from making comments. Although in Browning's voice, the entire episode is seen from the perspective of the professor as the representative of Browning's critics, so that we never see Pambo, Browning's double, objectively or from within and the focus is on the observation of his critics. The professor's misinterpretations of Pambo's problem with the verse stand for the critics' inability to observe Browning correctly. To show that his critics judge him without being aware of their own limitations, Browning has recourse to an even stronger irony than in 'James Lee's Wife'. The professor accuses Pambo of a deficiency of which not Pambo but he himself is guilty: he cannot grasp the import of the verse '*I said I will look to my ways / That I with my tongue offend not*' (17-18). Pambo states the difficulty of the psalm's injunction thus:

*'I will look to my ways – were doing
As easy as saying! – that I with my tongue
Offend not – and 'scape pooh-poohing*

'From sage and simple, doctor and dunce?' (42-5)

Unlike the critics, he is acutely aware that putting the injunction into practice is not so easy and that it is impossible (for the poet) to satisfy equally the most disparate critical

standards of ‘sage and simple, doctor and dunce’ (45). It never occurs to the professor that a communication must be adapted to its addressee.

The professor’s short-sighted eagerness to recite the rest of the psalm – a prayer on the transitoriness of life – also denounces the dominant literary taste for an intersection of the systems of morals, religion and art. By contrast, in the enunciation, Browning’s treatment of the parable convention surreptitiously undermines the mixture of poetry and morals. The similarity of the poem’s form to the parable raises expectations that it will impart a moral truth and thus accord with the critics’ values, but the point it makes is less moral than linguistic. The incongruity of ‘a grave tale told in crambo’ announced in line 2 already indicates that the poem digresses from the norm at least in its style. After the narrative, at the point when a parable would spell out clearly the application of Pambo’s story to Browning’s situation, self-observation is again made indirect by the introduction of a light metaphor, which degrades the critics’ guidance to artificial torchlight in comparison to the poet’s natural light. The speaker ‘Browning’ addresses Pambo:

Brother, brother, I share the blame,
Arcades sumus ambo!
Darkling, I keep my sunrise-aim,
Lack not the critic’s flambeau,
And look to my ways, yet, much the same,
Offend with my tongue – like Pambo! (49-54)

On the surface, Browning acknowledges his inability to conform to critical norms, but the Latin quotation from Virgil’s *Eclogues* (VII, 4) implies that Pambo and Browning have already attained an ideal Arcadian state despite their critics’ opinions. The deficiency is actually not Browning’s but that of the critics with their short-sighted concept of communication, which assumes it is easy for an author to appeal to all readers.

Browning’s preoccupation with the view which the public has of him is also central to the ‘Epilogue’ to *Asolando*. It asks the question ‘Being – who?’ (10) exactly at its centre and is probably Browning’s most conscious attempt at self-definition, but it is also the most strained and exposed effort among his poems *in propria persona* to exert control over his public image. In the enounced, as the intimate tone suggests, the utterance is presented as the poet’s farewell to his personal friends or a small circle of sympathetic readers in anticipation of his death. It is his final effort to correct the view

they have of him, who is 'so loved, yet so mistaken!' (6). The fact that the text was published indicates that the author's motivation for writing it is the need to sustain his self-conceptualisation beyond his death and to impose it on the *wider* public too. He can be sure of a certain temporal transcendence through his writings, which will remain after him, but he is concerned that the identity proclaimed in the poem should continue to live in the memory of the reader.

Browning employs a number of devices to manipulate his fictional addressees – and ultimately the reader – into adopting his view of himself. Firstly, he establishes a complicity with them through the protestation of their mutual love. The parenthesis in 'where – by death, fools think, imprisoned – / Look he [Browning] lies' (3-4), which was amended from the manuscript reading 'you think', flatters them by conceding them a superior insight in comparison to the fools who have a wrong notion of death. The first two stanzas outline the fools' idea of a pitiable Browning, helplessly imprisoned in death. The self-reference in the third person in the first stanza is a token of his refusal to identify with his public image or negative antitypes, 'the slothful, [...] the mawkish, the unmanly' (8). It contrasts with the first person used for his own idealised self-image in the second stanza. However, in the third and fourth stanzas, he also uses the third person for his own self-conceptualisation and thereby surreptitiously passes off his self-created image as a detached hetero-observation.

Posing as a dead speaker further contributes to the impression of objective distance. As Walter Benjamin states with reference to narratives, the point of view at the threshold of death is the only one that permits a narrator a retrospective overview of his whole life and enables him to perceive causality and meaning (456). By stepping outside his living self, Browning can for once lay a certain claim to an absolute self-observation. The credibility of this move is enhanced by the coincidence that the 'Epilogue' closes his last collection and that Browning died on the day of publication, so that for the reader it is indeed a posthumous voice.

The speaker dictates how he wants to be perceived. Through a syntactic parallelism, he rejects the temporal location of the vision in which he appears. In his proposition of how the living should think of him when he is dead, he offsets the initial 'At the midnight in the silence of the sleep-time' (1) with 'at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time' (16), which indicates that he does not accept the passivity of death and still identifies with the day's activity. But the self-portrayal as an undaunted

optimist in the third stanza is so hyperbolic that it raises the suspicion that he does not quite believe his own protestations. In the last stanza, he indeed turns to the addressees to confirm his self-conceptualisation and closes on the request that they encourage and cheer him. The imperatives and the direct speech which he fashions for them exert control, but they also suggest that, were he truly convinced of his optimistic creed, he would not need to muster up these fictional supporters.

Is the author aware of this insecurity which shines through in the enunciation? According to Furnivall, the president of the London Browning Society, no. At the first meeting of the society after the poet's death, he reported that, after having read the third stanza with its confidently positive self-portrayal to his daughter-in-law and sister, Browning remarked: 'It almost sounds like bragging to say this, and as if I ought to cancel it; but it's the simple truth and as it's true, it shall stand' ('Meeting' 6). Besides, in contrast to many other self-observing poems, there is not even a trace of humour, which would betoken a critical distance in relation to the enounced. Thus the poet who demonstrates in 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church' how unlikely it is that the self-portrayal and injunctions of the dying will be heeded, apparently does not notice that the epitaph he writes for himself is just as precarious.

The only poem that does resemble the 'Epilogue' is 'Prospice' (published in 1864). Apparently written under the impact of EBB's death and *in propria persona*, this poem envisions Browning's encounter with death in a tone and with imagery that are taken up by the 'Epilogue' and make the latter poem appear like a re-writing of the former. One could thus interpret the device of the voice from beyond the grave and the addition of the addressees' direct speech in the 'Epilogue' as tokens of the older Browning's awareness that his self-conceptualisation as a staunch fighter was problematic and needed to be confirmed by other, authoritative voices. As far as the members of the Browning Society were concerned, he seems to have been successful in convincing them of his idealised self-image. The newspaper report on their meeting records almost unanimous praise of his 'invigorating and buoyant faith' from which they 'took cheer and strength to struggle and fight on' ('Meeting' 6).

However self-righteous and flawed the 'Epilogue' may appear, the device of giving the two final lines over to the direct discourse of his addressees nevertheless has the merit of characterising Browning the poet better than the flattering image of his personal philosophy in the enounced. It shows that even when he has decided to speak

Chapter III

in propria persona and when confronting death, he slips into his general mode of inventing dramatic monologues. Until his very last, he can resist neither his urge to present dramatic voices nor his occasional habit of using speakers as his mouthpiece. Browning's final word could not be more Browningsque.

IV. THE CONFRONTATION WITH THE CRITICS AND THE PUBLIC

Browning's literary fame developed very slowly. His sales only improved in the 1860s, when he had long reached his artistic maturity. Even then his sales figures never came anywhere near the poetic bestsellers by Tennyson or Keble (Litzinger and Smalley 536-7). The causal link between unsympathetic reviews and poor sales is an obvious one, and the reviews of Browning's new publications were for a long time tainted by the lasting impression of obscurity in his early works, above all *Sordello*. The portrayal of the second student in *Pippa Passes* as a representative reader who merely reiterates the reviewers' opinions bears witness to Browning's conviction that his public image and the readers' literary taste were thoroughly informed by the critics (see Chapter III.2).

A few samples from Browning's correspondence reveal an ambiguity in his attempt to come to terms with his lack of popularity. His vehement denials that he ever cared about or responded to criticism are called into question by many remarks suggesting that he was hurt by his reviews. His most comprehensive statement on the subject, the long paragraph in answer to EBB's inquiry about his 'sensitiveness to criticism' in the letter of 11 February 1845 (*Corr.* 10: 69-72), is indicative of the difficulty he has in formulating a coherent picture of his reputation and his attitude towards it. He first assures EBB: 'I do my best, all things considered – that is for *me*, and, so being, the not being listened to by one human creature would, I hope, in nowise affect me.' There is an uneasy tension here between the confident 'in nowise affect me' and the doubtful 'would, I hope'. He goes on to elaborate on his unconcern about the marketable value of his poetry by comparing cabbages which he could take to Covent Garden market in exchange for money to plays which he could take to the Covent Garden theatre, which should be rewarded with praise. This indicates that he wishes to be remunerated for his work in a currency that is inherent to the art system rather than by economic profit and that he does want to be 'listened to'. He then denies outright his dependence on the critics' approbation, saying that if the reviewers do not pay him in their 'gold-currency', he will 'go very lightheartedly back to a garden-full of rose-trees, and a soul-full of comforts'. Nevertheless, he admits he would not mind if he could sell some of his literary 'greens' to please his parents and relieve his finances. However, he suddenly tells EBB that even where he *is* acknowledged, his admirers

have ‘a sad trick [...] of admiring at the wrong place’.¹ After a comparison of the reviewers’ judgements to those by ordinary tradespeople, which implies that the reviewers are surprisingly ‘well-behaved’, he closes on a condemnation of poets who revise their work to suit the critics’ taste, like Tennyson, who ‘reads the “Quarterly” and does as they bid him, with the most solemn face in the world – out goes this, in goes that, all is changed, and ranged.. Oh, me! –’.²

On the one hand, Browning stresses his indifference to any kind of criticism. In a letter to Ruskin, he states that he would even be suspicious of a positive reception:

I look on my own shortcomings too sorrowfully, try to remedy them too earnestly: but I shall never change my point of sight, or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when the public, critics and all, begin to understand and approve me. (10 December 1855, Collingwood 202)

And writing to Domett, he pretends to be delighted with bad reviews:

They take to criticizing me a little more, in the Reviews, – and God send I be not too proud of their abuse! For there is no hiding the fact that it is of the proper old drivelling virulence with which God’s Elect have in all ages been regaled. (15 May 1843, *Corr.* 7: 125)

On the other hand, the same letter to Domett continues with a furious comment on one ‘poor bedevilled idiot’ reviewer who had praised Browning in private but had thought it expedient to attack him in his review, a charge levelled at several other critics in a letter of 19 March 1862 (Hudson 101). Browning’s many sardonic remarks and disdainful animal metaphors for his most derogatory critics (DeVane and Knickerbocker 37-8, 85, 87, 92-3, 97), above all the poetaster and reviewer Alfred Austin (McAleer *Blagden* 332; Hood 159; Landis 300; Griffin and Minchin 260), are even clearer signs that the equanimity about his reputation was wishful thinking rather than genuinely felt.

Browning’s outspokenness about his critics in private letters contrasts with his extreme reluctance to comment on his reputation in public. This is, of course, an aspect of his consistent refusal to gloss his poems publicly and to reveal his personality and opinions. His two essays, in which he adopts the role of the literary critic, do not even state explicitly that their author is a poet – the ‘Essay on Chatterton’ was published anonymously in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* of July 1842 –, although for the initiated

¹ See my full quotation of this passage in Chapter III.2.

² For a fiercer critique of Tennyson’s revisions, which derive from his being ‘miserably thin-skinned, sensitive to criticism (foolish criticism)’, see the letter of 13 July 1842 (*Corr.* 6: 32).

reader both texts intimate that the issues discussed reflect Browning's artistic preoccupations in the period when he wrote them. This chapter will focus on the most notable exception to this rule of not referring to himself in public, the group of six poems *in propria persona* in the volume *Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper et cetera* (1876) which transfer the discussion of his reputation from the private realm of the correspondence into the public space of his poetry and confronts the critics' ideal of the poem as the poet's self-expression with his own impersonal poetics.

J. Hillis Miller accounts for Browning's general refusal to reveal his self in his poetry by arguing that it stems from his realisation that his own indeterminate self does not fit into the Victorian conceptualisation of selfhood, which adheres to the 'conviction that each man has a substantial inner core of self' (*Disappearance* 104, see Chapter II.3):

Browning's excessive desire for privacy [...] may be not so much an attempt to hide the positive facts of his private life as an attempt to keep hidden his failure to have the kind of definite, solid self he sees in other people, and feels it is normal to have. (*ibid.*)

La Saisiaz, in which Browning bases his reasoning on the Cartesian *cogito* (218), seems to confirm the view that he sees this 'core of self' as an ideal. Constance Hasset remarks that his characters 'often [...] express their ontological certainty in metaphors of center, core, and depth' (139). She takes this to be also Browning's position. But through the exposure of the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the speaker's identity in the enunciation of many dramatic monologues, Browning calls this certainty into question. He seems to be at a threshold: unable fully to conceive or openly approve of this challenge to Cartesian epistemology, he can only hint at it in the enunciation. In *Pacchiarotto*, the furthest he can go is to use the metaphor of the house to denote his 'core of self', or rather the most precious aspect of his identity, his private self; but it remains inaccessible. This reiterates the statement made in 'One Word More'. The earlier poem, however, still displays Browning's genuine desire to express his private identity in poetry and to overcome his split into private and public self. This cannot just be explained by the fact that he is engaged there in an intimate address to EBB, since the reader of *Men and Women* 'overhears' the utterance. Published twenty-one years later, *Pacchiarotto* never betrays any wish to reveal his personality in the work of art. The title poem, 'Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper', states that the

one admissible channel of communication between the poet and the public is the chimney. Only smoke, which is a mere token of the inhabitant's presence, can pass through it. The agency of the author is felt, but the public is not permitted to spy on his self through a window.

In my view, this denial of access to the author through his work is not so much proof of Miller's hypothesis about Browning's unstable identity as an indication that Browning has moved to a stance in line with the principles of functional differentiation, which entails that the separation of systems, namely those of the artist's self and the art system. The relative liberation of art from the functions of representation or mediation for other systems like politics, religion or morals during the Romantic period was already a significant step towards the autonomy of the art system, although these functions were often only denied in order to reserve the literary text for the expression of the system of the artist's self. However, the general readership of the 1870s in their expectations did not observe a distinction between poetry as a self-contained medium and other systems. Faced with the destabilising disjunction of science, religion and morals, a common reaction was to revert to an even stronger belief in their mutual dependence. This is reflected in the high standing of poetry as a medium for religious and moral truths. The Browning Societies attracted relatively few readers who had come to appreciate the formal intricacies of the dramatic monologue; they owed their popularity to most members' interest in moral and religious themes and their conviction that the monologists' philosophy was the author's. Furnivall, who considered himself one of Browning's most insightful readers, spoke up for many frustrated disciples when he expressed his impatience with

'so many imaginary persons' behind whom he insists on so often hiding himself, and whose necks I, for one, should continually like to wring, whose bodies I would fain kick out of the way, in order to get face to face with the poet himself, and hear his own voice speaking his own thoughts, man to man, soul to soul. ('Foretalk' to the Browning Society's edition of the *Essay on Shelley*, quoted in Peterson *Trumpeter* xxxiii)

By apparently expounding his philosophy and faith in later poems – notably in *La Saisiaz*, his commercially most successful collection *Ferishtah's Fancies* and the *Parleyings* – and thus giving his audience the didacticism they wanted, Browning gained popularity at the price of reverting to a pre-modern interdependence of

systems.³ These later works also show him succumbing to the most notable new overlap of systems that the nineteenth century fosters: the influence of economic categories on the arts, which results from the increasing commodification of art. The reference to his finances in the letter of 11 February 1845, quoted above, is an early indication of this temptation.

In contrast, when poetics and his own identity became the subject, Browning could be radically modern and go a step beyond the Romantics. If applied strictly, operative closure of the art system means that the personality of the artist is also external to the art system of which his work is part. Thus the poem should not be the expression of the artist's self, as in the Romantic expressive lyric, but should be an end in itself. The request that Browning reveal his self in his poetry, to which he replies in *Pacchiarotto*, shows that the critics and the public do not make such a distinction. For them, poetry is only the means of penetrating the system of the poet's consciousness, or as John Keble views it from the poet's perspective, poetry is 'a kind of medicine divinely bestowed upon man: which gives healing relief to secret mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest reserve' (1: 22). In opposition to this, Browning's concept of the objective poet implies a fully autopoietic art system. The objective poet is not manifest in his work because his self is not an element of the art system, whereas the subjective poet subjects art to the purposes of his system of consciousness. Still under the influence of the Wordsworthian preference for poetry as self-expression, the 'Essay on Shelley' of 1852 draws the distinction without privileging one over the other, but in his own mature work Browning opts for the poetry of complete autonomy.⁴

The *Pacchiarotto* poems restate the point of the essay through the dichotomy between public and private self. The inaccessible private self stands for the system of the poet's consciousness or for the poet in his role in the system of a family or couple. Therefore, in 'One Word More' love cannot be properly expressed through a poem in the art system, but only in the private communication of the couple. Browning's public self has to be understood as the abstract creative agency which produces his poems and participates in the literary market. The split is most obvious in the imaginary ideal poet-shopkeeper in 'Shop', who has two houses for his two distinct selves.

³ *R&B* also has recourse to codes external to the art system, but in this case the enunciation intimates the limitations of the poet-speaker's value system.

⁴ Of course, Browning's adoption of the subjective / objective dichotomy, which has its origins in the theories of the Schlegel brothers and Friedrich Schiller, is in itself a tribute to Romantic ideas.

If art is to provide objects for second order observation, and the aim of Browning's poems *in propria persona* is not to display his private consciousness, what is their function? We have seen in Chapter III that Browning uses poems to monitor the development of his *artistic* identity, but when the self-reference is explicit, his self-observation is always combined with an observation of how the readership observes him. Browning's intention to incite the readers – both the general reader and the professional reader, the reviewer – to a critical observation and revision of their aesthetic categories is more obvious in *Pacchiarotto*, since the poems are directly addressed to his critics.

I want to argue that the *Pacchiarotto* poems thus display a further aspect of Browning's move towards a radical operative closure of the art system, in addition to the exclusion of the poet's private self from his work. Like Wordsworth in his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of his 1815 *Poems*, Browning sees himself as an innovator who has 'the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed' (Wordsworth 2: 944). But while Wordsworth still feels the need to supplement his 'taste-shaping' poems with explanatory prose prefaces, *Pacchiarotto* conveys Browning's poetics only through the poems themselves. Autopoiesis of the art system is usually taken to mean that art criticism and aesthetics, and no other discourse, has the authority to discuss art (Schmidt 360-76; Plumpe). However, works of art are themselves media of communication, insofar as they incite the recipient to a more discriminating observation and stimulate communication within the system (Luhmann *Kunst* 90 and 129). By voicing his poetics inside the poem itself, Browning makes poetry truly self-reflexive and self-generative and comes close to Schlegel's concept of the fusion of criticism and fiction in his '*progressive Universalpoesie*'.⁵ It was of course not unprecedented in the period to discuss poetics and to respond to one's critics in poetry. What distinguishes these poems is that they are not authoritative manifestos put to verse, as in Pope's 'Essay on Criticism'; rather, they engage more dramatically and dynamically with the critics' general views and particular points of criticism concerning Browning's poetry. The poems' second order observation of criticism thus creates a closed circuit: poetry becomes the reflective medium of criticism just as criticism is that of poetry.

IV.1. The Dialogic Set-Up as Cultural Critique

The formal set-up of the *Pacchiarotto* poems *in propria persona* is an indication that the observation of Browning's readers and not only of himself is a central purpose. Unlike Browning's religious poems, poems about his self-conceptualisation as a poet hardly ever seem to be generated by an internal urge to state his convictions. Instead, they are usually only written in response to criticism – most famously Alfred Austin's

⁵ See Schlegel's tenet in 'Lyceum' frag. 117: 'Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden.' ('Poetry can only be criticised by poetry.') Browning takes an alternative way to that of Oscar Wilde, who in 'The Critic as Artist' posits the ideal of criticism as an aesthetically appealing discourse.

malevolent reviews, which were the impetus for the title poem – and as if against his will. The structure of the ‘Epilogue’ shows how he tries to defer explicit self-reference as long as possible. Although it is the most extended evaluation of his own artistic merit, the poem opens on a long summary of the audience’s taste and their depreciation of Shakespeare and Milton (stanzas i-xii). After a short reference to their opinion on Browning (xiii), it reverts to the English classics (xiv-xviii) and only at the end turns to self-observation (xix-xxviii). The conjunction of his poetics with the subject of criticism in this collection shows once more Browning’s preference for defining himself dialectically, in this case through the confrontation of his own self-observation with the critics’ hetero-observation of him.

Rather than assuming a detached authorial voice, Browning presents himself as a speaker in a dramatic dialogue with his critics – ironically addressed as ‘friend(s)’ in ‘House’, ‘Shop’ and the ‘Epilogue’. The opening lines of ‘At the “Mermaid”’, ‘House’ and ‘Shop’ give the impression of plunging *in medias res* into a dialogue, in which the speaker replies to an interlocutor. All of these poems give space to paraphrasing his opponents’ opinions or even quoting them in direct speech. This polyphony of two voices may be called dialogic in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*. It provides a rare example of the dialogic potential of poetry. Bakhtin maintains that in contrast to the novel, whose characteristic is the combination of multiple voices, the lyric is usually monologic, since it is the utterance of a single, unified voice (264). This generalisation certainly holds true for the majority of poems, especially the Romantic expressive lyric, which Shelley describes in the ‘Defence of Poetry’ as the monologic utterance of ‘a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude’ (31), but not for the genre of the dramatic monologue, which is always one side of a dialogue and on which these poems are modelled.

The *Pacchiarotto* poems support Isobel Armstrong’s thesis that dialogism is a general characteristic of the Victorian poem (*Victorian Poetry* 14-15). She explains this as the influence of W. J. Fox’s utilitarian idea that drama – with its resources of dialogue, relationship and objectification – can externalise conflict and thus become a locus of ‘cultural critique’ (153). According to Armstrong, Browning realises the possibility of staging a cultural critique through the structuring process of the dramatic monologue. She demonstrates this in her interpretation of ‘Madhouse Cells’ as a parody of John Stuart Mill’s poetics of the overheard expressive lyric (141ff.). We have

seen that the poems analysed in Chapter II practise a subdued critique of EBB's poetics in that they enact the dialogic antagonism between Browning's objective and her subjective poetry. More clearly, the references to 'Browning' by his characters discussed in Chapter III.2 confront the public's view of him in the enounced with the author's ironic presentation of their point of view in the enunciation. In *Pacchiarotto*, this antagonism is more literally dialogic because the poems include both Browning's own voice and the paraphrasing of the critics' voice.

By providing his side of a dialogue, Browning is able to state unambiguously where he disagrees with his critics. In outlining his poetics, he evidently hopes to impose them and his self-conceptualisation on the public. However, the act of speaking *in propria persona* to explain why he does not speak in his own voice repeats the paradox of 'One Word More'. This has led critics to denigrate the artistic value of the *Pacchiarotto* poems, even though they readily draw on them to underpin their description of Browning's technique. Ryals's opinion that the whole volume is not formally innovative and that form and content contradict each other is representative (*Later Poetry* 142).

It is my contention that these poems are not simply a concession to the critics' taste for self-expression and thus thoroughly inconsistent with Browning's poetics. I will argue that they are true to the principle of second order observation which underlies the dramatic monologue and the poems *in propria persona* which I have analysed so far, in that they use techniques (which are not immediately apparent) whose effect is to observe and undermine the values of the average Victorian reader of poetry as they are shaped by and articulated through the reviews. If Browning were seriously striving to satisfy his critics, he would not discuss his poetics while refusing to expose his private self, which he considers to be the critics' main interest. The humorous tone and the self-conscious rhymed stanza form also suggest the author's detachment from the enounced in these poems.

Seeming to accept the critics' standards fulfils a purpose. Despite purporting not to care about their opinion, Browning knows that he is dependent on them for his public image. He therefore uses the poems to establish a reciprocal power-relationship in which he can also impose his power on them. Instead of facing his critics on their

own ground of prose essays or prefaces,⁶ he draws them into the text and replaces the superiority of their critical metadiscourse over his literary discourse, which they evaluate, with two other hierarchies. Firstly, in his role as a speaker, he and his interlocutors are on the same *narrative* level, but the speaker occupies a superior level of *observation* because he comments on the critics' observation of him. Secondly, as the author, he has the power to create his characters and portray them as unfavourably as he likes. This is most obvious in the title poem. Browning portrays Alfred Austin in the burlesque narrative of Pacchiarotto, forces the reviewers of the leading periodicals into the inferior social role of chimney sweeps, and invents the uneducated, colloquial speech of their leader, alias Austin (469-73). However, Browning goes beyond these rather crude devices. He pretends to accede to the critics' ideal of the personal lyric voice without producing the expected confessional poetry, and he adopts and adapts elements of their discourse, such as the metaphors and examples they use, to show them their limitations. Before examining his more complex reversal of the concept of self-expressive poetics, I will consider the different means by which he usurps his antagonist's voice in two poems.

IV.2. The Appropriation of Voice

Commentators usually condemn 'Of Pacchiarotto', the first poem in the body of the collection, as an inappropriately offensive and personal response to Alfred Austin's reviews of Browning's works. After having silently endured harsh criticism for forty-three years, Browning is forgiven a certain awkwardness in expressing his anger in his only direct attack on a particular critic who had repeatedly maligned him (e.g. DeVane *Handbook* 396). The other poems in the volume avoid a direct confrontation by using the ironic but more vague address 'friend(s)'. In 'Shop', Browning even circumvents an explicit self-reference by creating the *alter ego* of the ideal shop-owner. Contradicting DeVane and following William Lyon Phelps's analysis of the proof sheets, Ashby Bland Crowder concludes in his study of the textual genesis of 'Of Pacchiarotto' that the revisions 'point to a composed mind that had control over its emotions' (73). The two instances of the word 'critics' in lines 469 and 541, he points out, were only added on

⁶ For Browning's use of prefaces, see the final section of this chapter.

the proof sheets (89). They signal that the poem is meant to engage with *all* of Browning's critics. Nonetheless, he does not tone down his attack on Austin. On the contrary, he made the poem deliberately more aggressive by inserting on the proofs the footnote by the printer's devil.

The dates on the manuscripts of the volume also prove that 'Of Pacchiarotto' was not Browning's first poem written in direct response to his critics. Dated '15 April 1876, 1 May 1876',⁷ 'Of Pacchiarotto' was actually the last of the poems *in propria persona* for the collection to be completed, after the finer irony and greater impersonality of 'House' and 'Shop', written as early as 1 and 11 February 1874, 'At the "Mermaid"', dated 15 January 1876, and the 'Epilogue', dated 24 April 1876. This means that the ordering of the poems in the collection is not chronological. Instead, there is a progression in the first few poems from the stark feelings in 'Of Pacchiarotto' towards the more general subject of 'Shop', which extends the call for the pursuit of an alien art form already encountered in 'One Word More' from artists to everyman. The authorial intention underlying this ordering might be to lure the readers with the impassioned self-revelation which they expect and then to guide them gently to the impersonality which Browning wants them to accept.

Yet 'Of Pacchiarotto' is not truly in a Browningsque voice, being the only instance of Browning following the tradition of poetic satire. Satire in its most personal form, i.e. *ad hominem*, is diametrically opposed to his dramatic monologues, which are the most *impersonal* poetic mode. Why would Browning choose a voice which dictates what the readers are to think of the critics and which does not leave them any room to draw their own inferences, so that he turns *volte-face* from his habitually subtle principle of second order observation requiring an active reader? In the enounced, the speaker justifies his tone as an endeavour to adapt himself to the style of his critics, since they can only understand their own polemical invective. He also points out a paradox: reviewers like Austin, whose chapter on Browning in his study *The Poetry of the Period* (1870) is clearly the butt of 'Of Pacchiarotto' in several places,⁸ posit ideals of musicality, harmony and simplicity, but do not practise these in their own writing. The speaker therefore considers the alternatives of either trying to 'content you, my

⁷ It is not clear whether the two dates refer to the beginning and end of composition or to the completion of the two sections of this bipartite poem.

⁸ Cf. the comparison of lines 456, 487-8, 496 and 559 with passages in *The Poetry of the Period* in Pettigrew and Collins's notes (2: 1042-4).

critics' (458) by following their precepts or of imitating their example, when he declares: 'So, this time I whistle, not sing at all' (496).

It does not matter much that Browning cannot solve this stylistic dilemma, because on the level of the enunciation the focus is not on his own style but on the second order observation of Austin's. Browning's method of criticising Austin is not just, as Norton B. Crowell has demonstrated, to allude to and ridicule incidents in Austin's life, such as his political turncoat habits (*Austin* 112ff.); Browning also appropriates the discourse of Austin's poetry through parody, while at the same time excelling in it. Austin, the future Laureate, prided himself in being the new Byron, and accordingly began his career with imitations of Byron's early satires like *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *The Vision of Judgment*. Browning therefore adopts the general mode of Byronic satire and, as Mairi Rennie points out, constructs Pacchiarotto's plot as an antidote to Austin's foolish Byronism ('Good Life' 8). He also satirises Austin by imitating specific texts. For instance, Rennie suggests a connection between the publication in April 1876 of the second edition of Austin's *Human Tragedy*, which was heavily imitative of Byronic satire and seems to provide a model for Browning's fanciful rhymes, and the composition of 'Of Pacchiarotto' in the following month ('Browning's *Pacchiarotto*' 157). Rennie also mentions that Kenneth Knickerbocker's doctoral thesis identifies Browning's allusion to Juvenal's sixth satire in lines 161-3 as an imitation of Austin's reference to that text in his satire *The Season*.

I want to focus here on the parallels with Austin's *My Satire and Its Censors* (1861), an obvious model for 'Of Pacchiarotto' since both poems have the same theme. In his poem, Austin is in the role of the slighted poet attacking the critic William Hepworth Dixon, the editor of the *Athenaeum*. 'Of Pacchiarotto' duplicates in its structure Austin's framed narrative about Dixon's career, the *motif* of the illiteracy of the critics, and the use of the dog and geese metaphors for them. The geese in 'Of Pacchiarotto' are usually annotated with the information that Browning named two of his four pet geese 'Edinburgh' and 'Quarterly' after the leading reviews (Irvine and Honan 479; Horsman 165), but they are also an intertextual reference to the stereotypes which Austin uses in his satire (pages 11-12).⁹ Intertextuality also clears Browning of the accusation of responding with personal insult to the predominantly

⁹ The lines are not numbered in this edition.

literary criticism in Austin's reviews. He is very probably less concerned with reviling Austin the man than with parodying *My Satire and Its Censors*, which is a personal invective against Dixon. Austin ridicules Dixon, who rose from a printer's devil to editorship (page 18), whereas Browning lets his printer's devil deride Austin. The footnote by the printer's devil is appended to the quotation "'Dwarfs are saucy'" in line 533, which is attributed to Dickens, another target of Austin's *My Satire* (pages 40-2), who is thus given the opportunity to strike back at Austin in Browning's text (King *et al.* 13: 352).

In addition to aping all these flaws in the second order observation of Austin's poetry, Browning provides this 'Banjo-Byron' (530) with an example of how the satirical side of Byron should be properly imitated: the Hudibrastic verse with its queer rhymes and puns gives Browning the possibility to demonstrate how pedestrian Austin's style is, while showing off his own ingenuity at finding fantastic rhymes. The poem is thus a 'satire on satire' (Rennie 'Good Life' 12). Browning undermines Austin's use of the genre by using it himself. An active reader is needed to understand that although Browning is speaking *in propria persona*, he does so to present someone else's discourse for observation. The poem is still flawed, though for different reasons from the one mentioned at the beginning of this section: the intertextual references are difficult to detect, and it is impossible to include Austin's stylistic defects and still write a good poem. Browning's translation of the *Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, his next publication after *Pacchiarotto*, follows a similar principle and suffers from the same contradiction. Mrs Orr (294) and DeVane (*Handbook* 415-18) argue that Browning wrote it to refute as untimely Matthew Arnold's advocacy of the imitation of the classics. Browning's method of word-for-word translation 'realises' Arnold's ideal so rigorously that the text becomes almost unreadable.¹⁰

'At the "Mermaid"' continues the dialogic confrontation with Austin on the level of content. It responds to his acidulous remark in *The Poetry of the Period* that the literary coteries which had imposed the taste for Tennyson were now striving to replace the present Laureate with Browning as their favourite (40-1). The fictional situation in which the poem's speaker – who evidently stands for Browning – is being

¹⁰ Yopie Prins challenges this interpretation, arguing that Browning identified with Aeschylus, who was accused of being obscure, and that he intended the alienating use of English in his translation as a metaphor for his own obscure poetry. The translation would then be a self-conscious response to the critical reception of his work and a foregrounding of the difficulty of reading him.

offered the title of 'Next Poet' (Laureate) and refuses the laurels ironically imagines that Austin's fear has come true. The obvious resemblance between the 'last king' whom the speaker is to succeed and Byron, Austin's idol, must have offended Austin even more.

In its ambiguous use of voice, however, the poem plays more with the general reader than with Austin. The Renaissance setting implies that the speaker is Shakespeare, but there are too many crassly anachronistic allusions to the Victorian literary scene in the poem which would never appear in a dramatic monologue. Already the motto, which turns Ben Jonson's prefatory poem 'To the Reader' from the First Folio into a humorous question, suggests that the speaker is not just 'for gentle Shakespeare put' (motto). These hints that the speaker voices Browning's views may satisfy the public's taste for poetry as self-expression, but they are so blatant that the poem becomes an exaggeration of the 'mouthpiece' function of dramatic speakers like Rabbi Ben Ezra.

This is no parody of Browning's own use of that device, though. Instead, his aim seems to be to incite the reader to observe his own response to this kind of poem. As in 'Time's Revenges', which initially seems to be *in propria persona*, the reader's desire to class poems in schematic categories of 'dramatic' and 'undramatic' is frustrated. He assumes that Shakespeare is a mouthpiece and is therefore meant to articulate the author's thoughts reliably. The appropriation of Shakespeare's voice seems to support Browning's advocacy of objective poetry with the weight of an established classic. However, his speech, in which he rejects the request that he express his self in his poetry in the manner of the Byron of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, is uttered while he is drinking at a tavern, and it transpires at the end of the poem that he is so drunk that he is left with 'no leg to stand on' (121). His authority is thus significantly undermined. The effect is that of Romantic Irony: the enunciation both affirms and discredits the poetics in the enounced. An advantage of this wavering between identification and non-identification with the speaker is that it relieves the author of responsibility for the rather arrogant optimism which is voiced in the enounced in response to the Byronic misanthropic stance. Whereas the ambiguity allows Browning not to be pinned down to a position and to evade observation, it gives readers the opportunity to notice their own confusion in the process of determining whether the utterance is a serious authorial statement or not. This should lead them

ultimately to question the validity of their distinction between ‘dramatic’ and ‘undramatic’.

IV.3. The Second Order Observation of the Public, the Art Market and Popular Poetry

The ‘Epilogue’ calls the satirical personal poems in the volume ‘nettle-broth’ (224), a purgative of phlegm (Rennie ‘Browning’s *Pacchiarotto*’ 238). And like nettle leaves, the poems are to sting the phlegmatic readers into a critical awareness of their aesthetic criteria. Yet the portrayal of the general public in the collection implies that Browning does not seriously expect these poems to have a reforming effect. In ‘House’, the interlocutor is given a voice in the final stanza. The fact that he refers back to the speaker’s disparaging allusion to Wordsworth’s ‘Scorn not the Sonnet...’ in line 4 by quoting approvingly from the same poem – “*With this same key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart*” (38-9) – shows that he has not assimilated the speaker’s argument against the sonnet. This inability to develop has particularly negative implications in view of the high value Browning placed on a perpetual striving for improvement. The realistic target group of the *Pacchiarotto* poems is thereby reduced to the small circle of perceptive readers who understand him anyway.

The poems present Browning’s critical second order observation of the categories which the critics and the general public apply in their evaluation of his work and of poetry in general. He denigrates, for instance, their call for the popular genre of ‘Tale adorned and pointed moral’ (‘At the “Mermaid”’ 59), the conventionality of which he reinforces by the allusion to the hackneyed line 222 from Samuel Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes*. Browning concedes that observation depends on the viewer’s perspective and the way in which he wants to perceive an object, so that the public may call ‘Brass’ what he more mysteriously terms ‘orichalc’ (‘At the “Mermaid”’ 50). But when it comes to what he considers the public’s favourite genre, the self-indulgent confessional poem, he accuses them of being so limited in their first order observation that they can only see the poet as a reflection of themselves, recalling Coleridge’s view that ‘the spirit in all objects which it views, views only itself’ (*Biographia Literaria* 153). The reader projects onto the poet his own qualities, or more likely his vices – ‘Rarities or, as he’d rather, / Rubbish such as stocks his own’ (i.e. his own self, ‘At the

“Mermaid” 41-2). In turning what should be self-observation into hetero-observation, the reader may thus condemn his own flaws vicariously through the poet. The poet who aspires to achieve fame with such an audience indulges this tendency by actively striving to resemble them, so that he and they become ‘cater-cousins, / Kith and kindred’ (‘At the “Mermaid” 63-4). I will show in this section how Browning tries to undermine the critics’ concept of the poem as the medium of the poet’s self-expression by adopting and reversing a metaphor from their discourse, their preferred genre and the conception of the author which they advance as their model.

The metaphor of his opponents which Browning picks up in all of the first five poems of *Pacchiarotto* is that of the poem as the house of the poet’s self. This choice was very probably inspired by the title of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnet sequence *The House of Life* (1870), to which ‘House’ quite obviously alludes (DeVane *Handbook* 400).¹¹ The metaphor conjures up general associations of physical shelter and security. More importantly, within the context of the Victorian cult of domesticity, it becomes associated with a particular kind of house: the home. A metonymy for the intimacy of the nuclear family and companionate marriage, it is the protected private realm in which the individual lives his emotional life, free from the obligations of social interaction and the ‘contamination’ of economic activity, which are relegated to the public sphere. The relentless self-probing in *The House of Life*, which Browning with all his dread of self-exposure must have considered highly exhibitionistic and morbid, articulates Rossetti’s conviction that the reader should be allowed to access the privacy of the poet’s house. The reader thus becomes a privileged observer of the poet’s intimate self.

In contrast, Browning is of the opinion that privacy is devalued if intruded upon by an outsider. Altick (‘Memo’ 67-8) suggests that his use of the house metaphor to express this stance in ‘House’ is inspired by John Greenleaf Whittier’s ‘My Namesake’ (1857), which denies the critics access to the poet’s self, asking:

Why should the stranger peer and pry
One’s vacant house of life about;
And drag, for curious ear and eye,
His faults and follies out?

Why stuff, for fools to gaze upon,

¹¹ Rennie (‘Browning’s *Pacchiarotto*’ 271) corroborates DeVane’s view by quoting a passage from Browning’s letter of 5 September 1863 to W. S. Story, which foreshadows the earthquake scene in ‘House’: ‘[Rossetti] lives after an easy fashion in a large old house at Chelsea, amid carvings and queernesses of every picturesque kind’ (Hudson 128-9).

With chaff of words the garb he wore [...] (5-10)

The textual parallel is convincing, and Browning had read and praised Whittier's previous work (Altick 'Memo' 68). However, I want to argue that Browning did not need this kind of inspiration, since the metaphor and the idea it conveys had long been on his mind. In the introduction to this chapter, I have interpreted his refusal to reveal his self in poetry from a theoretical point of view as an indicator of his practice of an aspect of functional differentiation. I now want to trace its origins in his correspondence through his use of the house metaphor. We will see that the metaphor is initially informed by personal implications and that Browning accomplishes the semantic shift in its application from the privacy of the lovers to the bipartite self of the poet.

In the courtship correspondence, EBB repeatedly refers to her confinement in her father's house with a mixture of desire to escape and anxiety at taking that step, using the metaphor of being thrown or jumping out of the window.¹² Already in his first letter to her, Browning refers to an earlier missed opportunity of meeting her by portraying himself as an intruder into

some world's-wonder in chapel or crypt,.. only a screen to push and I might have entered – but there was some slight.. so it now seems.. slight and just-sufficient bar to admission, and the half-opened door shut [...] (10 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 17-18)¹³

Later he calls her room in Wimpole Street 'the dearest four walls that I ever have been enclosed by' (7 August 1846, *Corr.* 13: 237). He protests: 'I could, would, *will* shut myself in four walls of a room with you and never leave you and be most of all *then* "a lord of infinite space"' (29 October 1845, *Corr.* 11: 146). He interprets the small room as an infinitude for the lovers in a way that is reminiscent of Donne's 'The Sun Rising'. Despite the somewhat disturbing *Hamlet* quotation here,¹⁴ he thus substitutes EBB's negative connotation of detention with the idea of the house as the privileged locus for the intimate union of the lovers. To this purpose he also applies the conventional metaphor of the 'House of Life'¹⁵ in his entreaty: 'Only, do you stay here with me in the "House" these few short years' (11 March 1845, *Corr.* 10: 120), and in the letter of 5

¹² For quotations from her letters, see Cook (*Lyrics* 145).

¹³ This passage is echoed in the second verse paragraph of 'With Christopher Smart'.

¹⁴ Hamlet's full sentence runs: 'O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams' (II, ii, 254-6).

¹⁵ The metaphor appears in a different context in 'Transcendentalism' (45).

April 1846 (*Corr.* 12: 215), in which he envisions himself chasing after an ever-elusive EBB.

Browning's love poems conceive of enclosure in negative terms if the lovers are apart.¹⁶ Their separation is frequently described in house-related imagery, such as 'the partition-wall' in 'In a Gondola' (26) or 'the mortal screen' in 'By the Fireside' (235). A real fortress-like villa encloses the lady in 'A Serenade at the Villa'. The positive uses, when the lovers are united inside the house, are more striking. 'Love in a Life' elaborates on the dreamlike hunt for the beloved from the letter of 5 April 1846, but like its companion piece 'Life in a Love', it relishes the playful pursuit of the invisible yet mysteriously present woman. Similarly, in 'A Lovers' Quarrel', 'By the Fireside' and 'Never the Time and Place', the couple's seclusion enhances their intimacy, whereas the exterior stands for a threatening society, which is shut out from the experience (Karlin 'Intimacy' 56-7). Only when the harmony of the couple is disrupted does the house become a constraint. Thus the wife of Andrea del Sarto meets her 'cousin' outside the house, whereas Andrea remains within the protective yet stifling home 'whose four walls make his world' (170) and dreams of the 'Four great walls in the New Jerusalem' (261). 'The Householder' also illustrates how closely Browning associates the house with conjugality.

The transition from the context of the lovers to that of the poet's self occurs in the 'Prologue' to *Pacchiarotto*. Originally entitled 'Dedication' on the manuscript, it is a love poem expressing his wish to be reunited with the deceased EBB. As a result of her double role as poet and beloved, it anticipates the declaration in the following poems that an external observer cannot enter the poet's privacy. Metaphor is particularly appropriate to demonstrate the impossibility of this endeavour to approach the inaccessible because it is so clearly a signifier standing between the reader and the real issue under discussion. EBB is not merely hidden behind an inanimate brick wall and the living creepers that cover it, but to this is added the parallel metaphor of the body and clothes screening the soul. The 'Prologue' stresses that the public's spying on the poet is a taboo by reversing Browning's position in relation to the collection it

¹⁶ Cook traces enclosure as a running theme in Browning's poetry (*Lyrics* Chapters 7 and 8).

heads: for once the self in the house is not Browning, and *he* wishes to intrude.¹⁷ His desire to penetrate EBB's innermost self is justified by his intimate relationship as her lover, whose motive is not the base curiosity of the public but the hope of union with her. He thus makes his case the exception which confirms the rule. Although EBB's death multiplies the obstacles, he can gain a sort of access to her through loving imagination – 'But my heart may guess' (13) –, a solution taken up in 'House' (see below).

Another root of Browning's use of the house metaphor with reference to the poet's self appears in his comments on the unauthorised publication of some of his letters from his correspondence of March 1862. He vents his exasperation at intrusions into his privacy in two related similes:

[...] it's just as if, being at my toilette, some clownish person chose to throw the bed-room door wide [...] (Hudson 102)

[...] it is as if some clownish person had thrown open the door of a bathing-machine in which I was undressing – the whole company on the beach stare & probably laugh – [...] (McAlear *Blagden* 102)

These extremely embarrassing instances of being observed display Browning's awareness that observation entails a power-relationship between observer and observed which may be articulated in degrading laughter.¹⁸ The association with his lifelong dread of nudity (Miller *Portrait* 104-5) anticipates the linking of the house with clothes and body imagery in the 'Prologue' and 'At the "Mermaid"' ('Bard's breast', 47, 'Bosom's gate', 67) and the parable of the earthquake in 'House', which exposes the most intimate details of the poet's household.

The earthquake episode shows graphically how Browning uses a method that can be described in terms of the Russian formalist technique of 'estranging' (Shklovsky 6): he takes the metaphor employed by advocates of the self-expressive mode, and by putting it into an unexpected context, he devalues its originally positive evocations of

¹⁷ Another variation on the theme in the collection is 'Fears and Scruples', which seems to be inspired by Browning's discovery that the letters by Shelley which he had prefaced with the 'Essay on Shelley' were forgeries. The poem uses the house and window metaphor, exploring the issue from the reader's side and explaining the restricted access to the poet through his privileged relationship with God.

¹⁸ Browning does not categorically reject the idea of showing letters to a person other than the addressee, though. In the letter to EBB of 15 February 1846 (*Corr.* 12: 73-4), which also uses house imagery, he sanctions this move if the letter in question was intended to be made public.

intimacy between poet and reader.¹⁹ The public's liking for the poetry of self-revelation is identified as vulgar voyeurism,²⁰ devoid of any aesthetic appreciation. The gapers in front of the collapsed house do not even feign empathy with the poet, when they comment indifferently: 'The owner? Oh, he had been crushed, no doubt!' (21) This seeks to disabuse the self-expressive poet of his hope of establishing a complicity with the audience. He cannot survive the unveiling of his privacy, and instead of being repaid for it with the anticipated 'praise and pity both' ('At the "Mermaid"' 60), he becomes the subject of their contempt. The description of the poet's bohemian, unconventional household seems a parodic reference to Rossetti's lifestyle (see footnote 11). The gapers' points of criticism – smoking, a dysfunctional marriage, the burning of exotic perfumes – bear witness to the public's narrow, *petit bourgeois* outlook and their utter inability to grasp the cosmopolitan, unconventional genius of the poet. In addition, they lack an essential quality: imagination. If they possessed this, they would gain a legitimate means of accessing the poet's private self:

Outside should suffice for evidence:
And whoso desires to penetrate
Deeper, must dive by the spirit sense –
No optics like yours, at any rate! (33-6)

The reader must abandon his desire for factual knowledge. Using his imagination, 'the spirit-sense', he comes to resemble the poet in the act of creation.²¹ In trying to imagine what the artist's private self would be like, 'Shop' follows this suggestion.²² The appeal of this guessing-game lies in the fact that one can never know

¹⁹ For the same method, cf. the reversal of the positive evaluation of classical 'perfection' in 'Old Pictures in Florence' (Chapter II.2).

²⁰ Cf. Edmond's remark that both Victorian genre paintings and the narrators of domestic narratives give the impression of spying on the family home through windows or keyholes (6).

²¹ The analysis of *Sordello* will show that imaginative co-operation in the act of reading is a prerequisite for the most sophisticated kind of poetry, 'synthesist poetry'. It allows the audience to access another type of house, the symbolically charged castle of Goito (I, 378-442). The interior of the castle gives an insight into both Adelaide's consciousness (e.g. in the Arab inscriptions in the panelled ceiling which display her interest in occult magic) and Sordello's sub-consciousness (e.g. the font with its Freudian connotation of a longing to return to one's origins and the waters of the womb).

²² Henry James might have had 'Shop' in mind when he wrote 'The Private Life' (1892): the addressee of the poem corresponds to Lord Mellifont, who only exists in society and vanishes in private, whereas Browning's 'fancy of a merchant-prince' (61) becomes the novelist Vaudry, a man with two physically separate selves, who hides his creative self because it is too precious to be wasted on the public, which only meets the superficial *causeur*. The use of the house metaphor in his account of the real Browning's separation of private and public life in *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (2: 89) seems to confirm the influence of *Pacchiarotto* on James, who, incidentally, lived just across the road from Browning's last London home in De Vere Gardens.

the artist's private character and can thus come up with ever-new versions of it. If, in contrast, the critics are allowed inside the poet's house, they are likely to distort it in their representations by 'bringing more filth into [Browning's] house / Than ever [they] found there!' ('Of Pacchiarotto' 476-7).²³

The imagery which is used to refer to the relation between the popular poet and the public has clearly negative connotations. In 'At the "Mermaid"', many alliterations ridicule the material interests of the popular poet, who is a parody of the Byronic misanthropist, and the public's arbitrary bestowing of favour: the poet is entirely at the mercy of the audience who 'Choose [their] chiefs and pick [their] parties' (3), so that 'blown up by bard's ambition' (7), he could 'Burst – your bubble-king' (8) at any time. Mixing the metaphorical with the literal, the references to trade in 'At the "Mermaid"', 'House' and 'Shop' document the popular poet's ready submission to the interplay of forces at work on the art market in an age which sees the growing commercialisation of literature. The self-revealing poets make themselves commodities, allowing the public 'to catalogue and label' ('At the "Mermaid"' 35) their feelings. Eager to 'buy [the public's] laurel' ('At the "Mermaid"' 57), they 'Sell cheap their souls for – fame' ('At the "Mermaid"' 32), advising the reader: "For a ticket, apply to the Publisher" ('House' 9). The attack is at its strongest in 'Shop', where this kind of poet is compared to a shop owner who turns out to sleep in a cupboard at the back of his shop and does not have a distinctive private self. He is contrasted with Browning's ideal of a shop owner, who does not care for profit, hardly looks up from reading his 'Times' when a customer wants to make a purchase ('Shop' 84), and cannot wait to close down shop and go home. How his private house looks remains a mystery. Only one thing is certain: it is completely different from the public shop of his poetry.

²³ This seems to be an allusion to Austin's (very probably) deliberate misquotations of lines from *Balaustion's Adventure* which he used to denounce Browning's metrical deficiencies, and about which Browning complained in a letter to Gosse (Hood 175-6).

Two years later, *The Two Poets of Croisic* states this attitude more radically in declaring that a 'happy life' is the criterion for a good poet (1240). The contrast between the happiest, and therefore best, poet and his self-exposing 'antagonist' in that poem (1241-3) repeats the opposition of the Byronic poet and the speaker's self-conceptualisation in 'At the "Mermaid"'. 'How It Strikes a Contemporary', the only poem in which we are allowed to spy on a poet's home, hints that the private self of the true poet is the very opposite of the exotic decadence imagined by the public. The contemporary finds

no truth in the report [that the poet eats] his supper in a room
Blazing with lights, four Titians on the wall,
And twenty naked girls to change his plate!' (72-7).

Instead, he discovers that the poet plays cribbage with his maid and goes to bed at ten. However, even this description cannot be taken as Browning's unambiguous idea of the poet's private self, since the poem is not spoken *in propria persona* but by an avowedly unpoetic representative of the public.

Browning's criticism of popular poets in *Pacchiarotto* goes beyond the two points that they degrade the work of art, which should be independent of other systems, first to a function in the economic system, and second to a medium of expression for the system of the poet's consciousness. The caricature of the Byronic pose in 'At the "Mermaid"' insinuates that the poets who claim to write in the Romantic vein do not adhere to their own supreme standard of sincerity. That their hyperbolic self-pity and morbid pessimism are not credible is highlighted by the quantitative indications in the description of their poetry, 'Out rushed sighs and groans by dozens, / Forth by scores oaths, curses flew' (61-2), and the inadequately light lexis in 'Should I give my woes an airing' (71).²⁴ What is presented as an overheard expression of genuine feelings is in fact deliberately staged by these poets to manipulate the audience's response, to generate 'praise and pity both' (60).

The same criticism appears in the allusion to the modern prototype of the autobiographical narrative, Rousseau's *Confessions*. The speaker of 'At the

²⁴ Cf. Browning's frequent attacks on Byronism, e.g. Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau's sarcastic re-writing of the address to the ocean at the close of *Childe Harold*, in which the bard tells the ocean that he does not appreciate it for its own sake but only uses it as a vehicle to make his thoughts heard (*Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* 537-55). Cf. also *Fifine at the Fair* (1105-28) and Browning's comment in a letter to Annie Egerton Smith on 16 August 1873 (Hood 159).

“Mermaid” concludes that with his positive outlook on life and his unwillingness to bemoan his hard fate, he will never be popular, saying: ‘Ah, but so I shall not enter, / Scroll in hand, the common heart’ (129-30). This echoes the famous passage at the beginning of the *Confessions*, in which Rousseau envisions himself on the Day of Judgement, presenting himself in God’s presence ‘mon livre à la main’ (‘my book in hand’) (5) – the book which contains the exhibitionistic narrative of the most intimate incidents of his life. Browning ironically replaces Rousseau’s divine judge with ‘the common heart’, implying that works of this kind are no private accounts to God or one’s conscience, as they often purport to be, but that they are in fact written as a sort of narcissistic self-exposure proffered with the intention of gaining popularity with the common reader. In contrast, Browning’s speaker stresses three times in this short poem that he is solely to be judged by his work, which does not bear any mark of his personality: ‘Here’s my [...] work’ (14, 17, 54). The phrase recalls the presentation of *Men and Women* to EBB in ‘One Word More’ (3 and 141).²⁵ In denouncing this self-staging of poets, ‘At the “Mermaid”’ touches upon the paradox which the Romantics had inherited from the age of sensibility. They deplored the general difficulty of expressing consciousness and authentic feeling, while nevertheless claiming for their works, which are so clearly consciously created artefacts, the ability to communicate the incommunicable. Browning’s explicit dismissal in his poetry of the claim to sincerity of the self-expressive tradition is of course also enacted in the dramatic monologue, which in the enunciation unveils the surreptitious or inadvertent motivations which underlie the speaker’s apparent sincerity.

After ‘At the “Mermaid”’ has dismissed the Romantic premise that the criterion of sincerity determines the quality of a poem, ‘House’ repudiates the specific poetic genre which is traditionally reserved for the poet’s self-revelation and a prime argument in its favour: the sonnet, and in particular the example of Shakespeare. This conjunction must elicit a response from Browning, who almost completely avoided the sonnet in his

²⁵ There is probably also an intertextual reference to Ben Jonson’s ‘To the Reader’ in the First Folio, which Browning parodies in his motto. Having argued that the engraver of Shakespeare’s portrait cannot draw the Bard’s wit as well as his face, Jonson concludes: ‘But, since he [the engraver] cannot, Reader, looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke’ (Shakespeare 90).

work,²⁶ but drew on Shakespeare as the exemplary objective poet in the ‘Essay on Shelley’ (1001). The quotation from ‘Scorn not the Sonnet...’ suggests that ‘House’ intends an intertextual controversy with Wordsworth, but as in the satire of Byronism in ‘Of Pacchiarotto’ and ‘At the “Mermaid”’, the precursor actually stands for the imitators. ‘House’ is in fact Browning’s contribution to the Victorian critical debate on the character and function of poetry and the evaluation of Shakespeare. Thus the opening line ‘Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?’ summarises Keble’s and Mill’s ideal of the lyric poem whose *raison d’être* is the expression of the poet’s private emotion. And the poem is more comprehensible in the context of the revived critical interest in Shakespeare in the nineteenth century.

Shakespeare was not only celebrated as the British national poet by such organisations as the New Shakespeare Society, whose president Browning was for a while. Among German Romantic theorists, especially Schiller and the Schlegel brothers, the Bard’s work became a point of contention in the dichotomy between subjective and objective genius.²⁷ Evaluations of Shakespeare also differed among British critics. Defenders of the ‘objective Shakespeare’ – who drew their arguments from the plays and narrative poems – included Coleridge, who contrasted Shakespeare’s objectivity with Milton’s subjectivity in a passage which may have influenced the ‘Essay on Shelley’ (*Biographia Literaria* 180),²⁸ Hazlitt, Keats, and of course Browning himself in the ‘Essay on Shelley’. Even the young Browning, who was so fascinated by the subjective genius, saw Shakespeare as objective. John Maynard considers Shakespeare the decisive factor in Browning’s artistic re-orientation and detects his influence already in the date and place of a Shakespeare performance at the end of *Pauline*, which foreshadow the substitution of Shelley and Byron with the objective dramatist as Browning’s literary idol (221ff.). In Maynard’s view, the experience of the most egocentric of Shakespeare actors, Edmund Kean, playing Shakespeare’s most egocentric character, Richard III, facilitated Browning’s transition from subjective to objective poetry.

²⁶ Of the twelve sonnets Browning wrote altogether, he published only four: the three sonnets following ‘Jochanan Hakkadosh’ are based on Rabbinical legend and the love lyric ‘Now’ seems to fit into the Petrarchan tradition, but inverts the order of quatrains and sestet. The unpublished sonnets seem mainly designed to show off his stylistic ingenuity. Of these, only the early ‘Eyes, calm beside thee,...’ of 1834 follows the convention of the sonnet as love poem.

²⁷ For a summary, see Abrams (*Mirror* 226–49).

²⁸ Coleridge also conceded that Shakespeare had a subjective side.

Supporters of the ‘subjective Shakespeare’ – who proved their point from the sonnets, which they assumed to be of autobiographical origin – included, besides Wordsworth in the ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ (2: 932), Edward Dowden with his exclusively biographical approach in *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* [sic] (1875)²⁹ and Carlyle. In ‘The Hero as Poet’ (1841), Carlyle conceded that Shakespeare’s works offered ‘no full impress of him’, but insisted: ‘His works are so many windows, through which we see a glimpse of the world that was in him’ (*Works* 5: 110). Browning seems to reply to this in ‘House’ when he says: ‘A peep through my window, if folk prefer; / But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine!’ (11-12)

‘House’ takes apart the conventional dichotomy of objective dramatist and subjective sonneteer. Instead of supporting his view of Shakespeare’s impersonality by reference to the plays, Browning maintains that even the apparently personal sonnets are no revelation of Shakespeare the man but dramatic utterances like his own dramatic monologues. His closing line, ‘Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!’ (40), turns the Romantic definition of the lyric as self-expression on its head and argues for a complete autonomy of the sonnet from its author. The rhetorical question and the exclamation confidently assume the superiority of Browning’s own ideal of impersonal poetry to be self-evident.

The same confidence in revising accepted views appears in the final two lines of ‘Shop’, where Browning even distorts a verse from the Bible to support his poetics. The lines which condemn the self-expressive poet who makes himself a commodity, ‘From where these sorts of treasures are, / There should our hearts be – Christ, how far!’ (109-10), reverse Matthew vi, 21: ‘[...] for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’ The same verse was alluded to in ‘Where the / my heart lies, let the / my brain lie also’ in ‘One Word More’ (4 and 142), when Browning pleaded for the acceptance of his dramatic poems as self-revelation, despite knowing that he could not fully see this through. In *Pacchiarotto*, he simply disregards the authority of the Bible and replaces it with his own.

²⁹ Dowden’s study was published after the composition of ‘House’, but it drew on his lectures from the spring of 1874 (Stavisky 70).

IV.4. Browning's Self-Conceptualisation

In taking a categorical view of Shakespeare as a purely objective poet, Browning becomes just as guilty of creating the Bard in his own image as the followers of the subjective tradition. His general strategy of self-definition through opposition has the advantage of reducing explicit self-reference to a minimum and of maximising the observation of his opponents; but it can also make suppressed similarities more evident. In this section, I want to argue that hidden resemblances to his foils beneath the diametrical opposition on the surface emerge as the central problem in Browning's self-conceptualisation within the collection. We will discover that the aspects in which he claims to distinguish himself from the followers of Romanticism are actually derived from the Romantic discourse of self-conceptualisation.

The 'Epilogue' confirms once more that the actual target of Browning's attack is not the Romantics themselves but the so-called 'Homerides' of the 'Essay on Shelley' (1004), i.e. writers whose bad imitations of the initiator of a new mode mark the decadence of an era. The denigration of contemporary poetry as 'spilth that has trickled from classic jowls' ('Epilogue' 126) is more radically expressed in the unpublished 'Gerousios Oinos', in which the imitators' poetry consists of the heel-taps of their predecessors' wine which they dilute with water. If they try to be original, they produce only vulgar home-made brew. Intended for *Jocoseria* (1883), this poem was withdrawn from publication, presumably because Browning judged the rather coarse parabolic dream vision to be too offensive. A further, and earlier, parallel is 'Popularity', which uses the imagery of the 'Homerides'' dilution of the great predecessor's poetry with reference to dye (see Chapter IV.5). Their lack of originality is so contemptible because the ongoing autopoiesis of the art system depends on temporal dynamics: works must be new and differ from others if they are to stimulate observations more effectively; but they are also superseded by other works and become outdated (Luhmann *Kunst* 85). Theorists like Edward Young in *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) or J. Moir in volume 1 of his *Gleanings* (1785), who influenced Romantic poetics, had established this principle by substituting the ideal of classical imitation with that of originality. In his self-portrayal, Browning appropriates the role of the original innovator which the Victorian followers of the Romantic tradition claim for themselves, while he pushes them into the inferior role of belated

imitators. And in the 'Epilogue', he not only declares himself to be new, but also uses the avant-garde argument of being of the future, by which he defers the moment when he will be out of date. In declaring that he can foresee his future fame, Browning implicitly lays claim to the absolute viewpoint which only the supreme observer God has and dismisses the critics' second order observation of his poetry.

To further secure his position, Browning likens himself to a number of classics in addition to Shakespeare – but not by claiming to imitate them, which would make him another Homeride. A classic work transcends temporality because it is by definition never antiquated and always original. The 'Epilogue' surreptitiously draws a parallel between Browning's poetry and Shakespeare and Milton. Stanza xviii, which contrasts a diamond hidden in a mine with the easily accessible truffles of popular poetry, is situated between a passage about the two English classics and one about Browning. It is therefore not quite clear whether stanza xviii is meant as an appeal to dig out the classics again or to make an effort to appreciate Browning's difficult poetry.³⁰ An oblique self-alignment with the eminent Greek authors, including his favourite dramatist Euripides, is implied in the poem's opening line, "The poets pour us wine –". This is an adapted quotation from EBB's 'Wine of Cyprus', in which she compares the effect on her of this too strong wine to the effect of the classical Attic authors. In 'Of Pacchiarotto', Browning explicitly claims affinity with Euripides and compares himself to Apollo,³¹ the God of poetry, through the remark that his birthday is the holy day of the god's birth (572-6). Moreover, Browning rebuts the charge of being unmusical by identifying with two composers destined to become classics, Beethoven and Schumann, whose breaking of established rules is proof of their genius (490-3).

Another distinctive feature of classic poets is that they combine two qualities of poetry that have become dissociated in the Victorian age and for which the 'Epilogue' uses the dichotomy of strong versus sweet wine:³² 'strong' poetry expresses meaningful ideas but in difficult form, while 'sweet' poetry conforms to the audience's view that

³⁰ The metaphor of the mine might have been inspired by Ruskin's letter of 2 December 1855 on 'Popularity', in which he concedes: 'I think you must be a wonderful mine', but goes on to lament that Browning's poetry is so hard to access (DeLaura 'Ruskin' 327).

³¹ This is once more an intertextual reply to Austin, who had suggested that Browning's frequent appearances in London society were motivated by his desire for fame: 'Small London literary coteries, and large fashionable salons, cannot crown a man with the Bays of Apollo' (*Poetry of the Period* 76).

³² Browning here seems to anticipate T. S. Eliot's concept of the 'dissociation of sensibility' in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (247). Eliot of course sees Browning as a poet who illustrates this split and writes a poetry of pure intellectualism without feeling.

the immediate aim of poetry is 'to please the world' ('Epilogue' 56).³³ The latter is based on the Wordsworthian tenet of pleasure as the primary aim of poetry (*Lyrical Ballads* 257-8). Browning denounces the reduction of this notion to a superficial preoccupation with form at the expense of meaning, whereas he would like to locate pleasure less in the realm of sensation and more in that of the intellect. It is again obvious that Browning's targets of attack are simplified *clichés* derived from Romantic concepts rather than the more heterogeneous and complex Romantic tradition *per se*, to which he is clearly indebted. In order to make his point, he certainly states his preference for 'strong' poetry more radically than in his general aesthetics, since the prosody of his lyrical poems furnishes ample proof that he does value sensual pleasure. The 'Epilogue' shows his dilemma: he denigrates the easy, 'syrupy' (29) poetry of mindless pleasure and insists on the superiority of poetry with moral value which incites to action, which 'swells resolve, breeds hardihood' (13). And yet he wants his 'stiff drink' (97) to please the reader. He manages the combination of irreconcilable opposites by introducing the temporal dimension of the wine's maturation through the successive stages of 'Sweet for the future, – strong for the nonce!' (108).

When assuming in 'At the "Mermaid"' (138-40) and the 'Epilogue' that the audience's taste will in the future adapt to his style, Browning draws on the stereotype of the prophet who is not recognised by his contemporaries. According to David Latané, this developed into a *topos* in English literature from the myth of the initial lack of success of *Paradise Lost*, which Milton himself fostered through his apostrophe to his muse: 'Still govern thou my song, / Urania, and fit audience find, though few' (VII, 30-1). In the Milton myth, the first readers converted the greater audience like apostles, so that the poem became comparable to the Gospel (Latané 'Sordello and Aesthetics' 18). Browning's identification with the *topos* is problematic because, as Latané's study shows, it was mainly propagated by the Romantic poets (15-26), for instance in Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (2: 933). It enabled them to accept their marginalisation as a temporary evil and to create a new social (anti-)role

³³ The same argument already appears in *Aristophanes' Apology*. Like Browning in the 'Epilogue', Aristophanes includes in his utterance the fictional speech of (a representative of) the public that discourages him from introducing innovations in his comedies because 'Old wine's the wine: new poetry drinks raw' (956). He takes up the metaphor in lines 1033-8. For Browning's use of the wine metaphor throughout his career, see Rennie ('Browning's *Pacchiarotto*' 246-8).

for themselves, in which they derived authority not through society but through considering themselves as a yet unrecognised innovator.

It is not surprising that the young Romantic Browning should have found the role of prophet attractive. Morse Peckham discusses the speaker's self-definition as 'priest and prophet' in line 1019 of the obliquely autobiographical *Pauline* and explains the identification with both roles as the necessary result of the self-definition of a young man who has 'as yet very little in the way of a unique self to define' ('Romanticism' 49). According to Peckham, he therefore defines himself 'in terms of a culturally available and validated social role', which has by 1833 become 'a Romantic commonplace' (*ibid.*). Peckham is guilty of an anachronism here, as he infers the self-conceptualisation of the Browning of 1833 from the 1888 version of the text. Up until this final revision, the phrase had been 'priest and lover'.

We do, however, find traits of the unacknowledged prophet in Paracelsus, who sees himself as an unrecognised genius. Here the author takes a critical distance through the dramatic form and the emphasis on the delusion and incapacity for love of a hero who is so self-enclosed that his audience is finally reduced to his only friend Festus. Although he distanced himself from Paracelsus, Browning later used the prophet myth for his own self-conceptualisation, most famously in *Sordello* (as shown by Latané) and 'One Word More' through the prestigious parallel with Moses. In the correspondence, he represented his first acknowledged publication *Paracelsus* as scorned by the reviews, the better – as Karlin suggests – to align himself with illustrious predecessors like Keats and the young Wordsworth (*Hatreds* 106). This was Browning's distortion of reality since the reviews were favourable enough to encourage his publisher to advertise Browning's works over the next ten years with the tag 'Author of Paracelsus' on the title page.

What was predictable in the young poet seems at odds with the mature Browning of *Pacchiarotto*, who distinguishes himself so sharply from Romantic subjectivism, but we have already seen that he does not scruple to usurp other elements of the Romantic discourse of self-definition, such as originality and genius. Following the Romantic pattern might be a rhetorical strategy designed to convince the audience with arguments they can accept as valid because they have become commonplace. Nevertheless, the many borrowings from the Romantics' self-conceptualisation at a time when Browning clearly differs from them make it difficult to perceive his

distinctive identity. This might imply that even the older poet can only conceive of his identity in already established categories, and that the closeness to the Romantic discourse is not entirely voluntary. Provided Browning was unconscious of his imitation, this would be an instance of René Girard's concept of mimetic desire, which states that rivals see themselves as diametrically opposed, whereas from an external point of view their similarity and mutual imitation can be perceived (Girard Chapter 6). What can be said with certainty is that even at this late point in his career, the Romantic / anti-Romantic dialogism within Browning, which is so prominent in the early poems on EBB, persists.

Browning's identification with the Romantics is partly justified in the 'Epilogue' because for once the central dichotomy is not between Romantic subjective poetry and Browning's objective poetry. Otherwise the poem would not draw its wine metaphor from line 168 of EBB's autobiographical and highly subjective 'Wine of Cyprus', which was a special favourite of Browning's precisely because '[t]here is so much of you in it' (19 August 1846, *Corr.* 13: 270).³⁴ In choosing the opposition between trivial pleasant form and significant content here, he creates a dichotomy in which he can project himself as a follower of the great Romantics. He actually makes himself the defender of Wordsworth against false interpretation by denouncing the degeneration of Wordsworth's tenets that the main aim of poetry is to please and that poetry should be written in simple language.

Another, more plausible, reason why Browning reverts to the Romantic discourse is that – regardless of the difference in poetics – he has inherited from the early Romantics the posture of the innovator who differs from the predominant literary taste. Even though the *Pacchiarotto* poems do not reflect directly on this, they illustrate Browning's theory about the history of poetry as a dialectical alternation of objective and subjective poetry as expressed in the 'Essay on Shelley' (1003-4). This becomes clearer if we look at Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of 1815, to which Browning seems to relate at several points in the volume. In his essay, Wordsworth presents his younger self of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* as an unacknowledged 'great and at the same time *original*' author who has 'the task of

³⁴ See also Browning's letter of 18 August 1846 (*Corr.* 13: 266). EBB's praise of Euripides from 'Wine of Cyprus' also furnishes the epigraph to *Balaustion's Adventure*. For another association of wine with strong emotion, see no. XXIII of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: 'Can I pour thy wine / While my hands tremble?' (7-8)

creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed' (2: 944). He maintains that by 1815 the British concept of poetry has been 'coloured' by his poems (*ibid.*). In the same vein, 'Scorn not the Sonnet...' – though written as late as 1827 when Romanticism was already well established – represents the attempt to rehabilitate the sonnet and its self-expressive mode after the greater impersonality of Neoclassicism. In the 1870s, when Browning is working on *Pacchiarotto*, the Romantic mode has reached its decadent phase. Now *he* is the poet who takes the place of the unacknowledged precursor, which Wordsworth vacated when he became the norm, and Browning will initiate the refreshing return to objectivity.

One other affinity with a common Romantic self-image is problematic: Browning's claim to write for God ('Of Pacchiarotto' 510-12; 'Epilogue' 157) or for a select audience of insightful 'friends who are sound!' ('Epilogue' 222). In the 'Essay on Shelley', it is the subjective poet who 'is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him' (1002), whereas the objective poet – as Browning defines himself by summarising his subject matter as 'Man's thoughts and loves and hates!' ('Epilogue' 153) – must not aim at obscure elitism. His main target group is the common reader:

[...] he is so acquainted and in sympathy with its [the audience's] narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole. The auditory of such a poet will include, not only the intelligences which, save for such assistance, would have missed the deeper meaning and enjoyment of the original objects, but also the spirits of a like endowment with his own [...] (1001)

The same attitude is expressed in his correspondence throughout his career. In the early letter to Domett quoted at the beginning of this chapter, he calls himself one of 'God's Elect' (15 May 1843, *Corr.* 7: 125), and in the letter to EBB of 11 February 1845, also cited, he claims: '[...] the not being listened to by one *human* creature would, I hope, in nowise affect me' (*Corr.* 10: 70, my emphasis). His response to the disappointing reception of *Men and Women* in a letter of 21 April 1856 to his publisher Edward Chapman shows him at his bitterest:

As to my own Poems – they must be left to Providence and that fine sense of discrimination which I never cease to meditate upon and admire in the public: they cry out for new things and when you furnish them with what they cried for, 'it's *so* new,' they grunt. (DeVane and Knickerbocker 92)

Discussing the same collection, Browning tells Ruskin: 'A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward' (10 December 1855, Collingwood

201). He adds, however, that producing demanding works like *Hamlet* is still worthwhile, since 'they act upon a very few, who act upon the rest'. Finally, Isa Blagden is told on 19 August 1865: 'As I began, so shall I end, taking my own course, pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God' (McAleer *Blagden* 220).

The contradiction of the objective poet writing for God is an indication of Browning's perennial difficulty in defining his relation to the audience, which alternates between seeing himself as their brother and as their superior (Woolford *Revisionary* 52). Woolford points out that *Sordello* (III, 840-2) tries to connect the poet as a Wordsworthian 'man among men' with the distant prophet by means of a qualitative progression from the 'worst' poets, who have to spell out everything for the reader and who 'say they so have seen', via the 'better' poets, who describe 'what it was they saw', towards 'the best' poets, who 'Impart the gift of seeing to the rest', i.e. the participating readers.

In *Pacchiarotto*, by contrast, the possibility of a better understanding between Browning and the public has become very doubtful. He admits his hermetic poetry may 'Never end sweet, which strong began' ('Epilogue' 148). The poems appear to be designed to win over a wider audience and adopt a seemingly unambiguous personal voice. However, the fact that Browning does not make any personal revelations and the complexities in the enunciation signal that he is not willing to settle for the 'cowslip wine' which the general public can appreciate.³⁵

So, rather than moving towards a relationship on equal terms as in *Sordello*, Browning in *Pacchiarotto* aligns himself with God and thereby distances himself even further from the audience. This is illustrated by his use of the wine metaphor. In 'Gerosios Oinos', which only observes his contemporaries, wine is merely an exquisite drink, but the biblical implications of the metaphor are exploited in the 'Epilogue', which is about Browning. In stating 'Earth is my vineyard' (154), he likens himself to God, who is the proprietor of the vineyard in the parables (Matthew xx, 1-16; John xv, 1-8). The earlier 'Popularity' (16-20) draws a similar parallel in the allusion to the story

³⁵ A related problem is Browning's oscillation between his general ideal of the poet as someone who can convert thought or inspiration into verbal expression – as he appears in Aprile's definition of God as 'the PERFECT POET / Who in his person acts his own creations' (*Paracelsus* II, 601-2) – and his occasional praise of the silent poet, like the ideal poet of the narrator of *The Two Poets of Croisic* who retreats into privacy and does 'not say, but think' (1273) and thereby refuses to communicate with the public.

of the marriage of Cana (John ii, 10), Christ's first miracle and proof of his divine nature. The metaphor of the 'true poet' (1) – whoever he is (see Chapter IV.5) – as 'good wine' (20), which God keeps until an indefinitely deferred apocalyptic revelation, equates the 'true poet' with Christ on yet another level, since Christ is embodied in the wine of the Eucharist,³⁶ whereas the inferior imitator Nobbs can only relate to wine in the profane form of claret (62). The poet appears as a saviour-figure, and through stressing his divine side, Browning portrays him as essentially different from the audience.

It is striking that while Browning denounces the commercial interests and, in Luhmann's sense, un-modern fascination with self-expression of other participants in the Victorian art system, he is in some respects so much less modern in his self-conceptualisation. When discussing his reception, there is no hint that he realises these inconsistencies in his self-image. With the exception of 'At the "Mermaid"', there is not even a touch of the self-directed irony in the enunciation which appears, for instance, in the poems analysed in Chapter III.2. Instead, the above quotations from the correspondence confirm that the author fully endorses the enounced here. Browning's recourse to the stereotype of the unacknowledged prophet with his divine authority is certainly a bitter reaction to his continuing relative lack of popularity and to the influence of commerce on literature. Another reason for his somewhat arrogant stance in these poems is that, in contrast to most of the poems we have seen so far, the function of the *Pacchiarotto* poems is so clearly to force his ideas on the reader. Whereas the poems about EBB, for instance, are means for arriving at a self-definition through a process which the reader can observe, *Pacchiarotto* states a static position with the central purpose of converting the reader to Browning's poetics and self-image – despite the declaration in the enounced that he cares only about a divine judgement. Browning is too intent to act on his conviction from the 'Essay on Shelley' that 'the misapprehensiveness of his age is exactly what the poet is meant to remedy' (1006). Although he concedes in the essay that there will be 'an interval between his operation and the perceptible general effect of it', it is quite clear that he would like to be appreciated immediately. The author is of course not likely here to foreground his own limitations or internal conflicts, and he is keen to back his self-image with authorities.

³⁶ 'The Names' later puts this analogy between God and poet into perspective. It emphasises that Shakespeare's finite creation resembles, but cannot equal, God's infinity.

But his desire to convince the reader makes him as subject to blind spots as a monologist who tries to persuade his interlocutor. A critical observation of the implications of his arguments in the enunciation can detect his problems in finding the right balance between difference from the norm and connection with the literary tradition. Thus, rather than making his stance clearer – which was the motivation for abandoning his principle of impersonality –, the *Pacchiarotto* poems inadvertently expose Browning's difficulties in constructing a role for himself as a new poet in the Victorian context.

IV.5. Alternatives: *Showing* instead of *Telling* in 'Popularity' and Romantic Irony in the 'Prologue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies*

In 1855, when Browning's dissatisfaction with his reputation would actually have been more justified, he had found a better way of presenting his poetics and his view of the literary scene to the reader. Like the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto*, 'Popularity' displays an acute awareness of the commodification of poetry, which becomes 'priced and saleable at last!' (57). The poem depicts the divinely protected and unacknowledged predecessor poet and contrasts him with his celebrated inferior imitators. But Browning avoids explicit self-reference, and instead of *telling* the reader what he is to think of him in the enounced, as he does so often in *Pacchiarotto*, he *shows* and enacts his argument in the enunciation. Although the unidentified speaker addresses a 'true poet' (1), his apostrophe does not lead to a fictional dialogic situation. As in 'Shop', the speaker is presented as a detached external observer, an ideally perceptive reader, whose response to the poet's work serves as a model for the implied reader. The debate as to whether the poem is *in propria persona* and who the 'true poet' is – Keats, an idealised Domett (Drew 85) or Browning himself (Altick 'Memo' 65) –³⁷ distracts somewhat from the main interest of the text. As in the dramatic monologue, the focus is less on the theme presented on the level of the enounced than on the way it is articulated in the enunciation.

³⁷ The creation of poetry from a natural, inconspicuous source fished in a 'rough mesh' (36), for instance, comes much closer to Browning's technique of drawing on realistic, sometimes sordid subjects than to that of Keats.

In addition to the biblical wine imagery mentioned in the previous section, the poem uses two other metaphors for which a number of possible sources have been put forward: the star and Tyrian purple. Joseph Solimine's suggestion that the purple metaphor was inspired by *Don Juan* Canto 16, stanza x, is not quite convincing, since – as Solimine admits (57) – the provenance of purple was common knowledge. One could similarly argue that 'God's glow-worm' in line 6 might be an echo of the description of the sonnet as 'a glow-worm lamp' in 'Scorn not the Sonnet...' (9). In contrast to these uncertain intertextual parallels, which merely suggest that the speaker draws on Romantic discourse, the star imagery certainly alludes to Keats. Four models have been proposed: the last stanza of Shelley's *Adonais* (Smith 156), Keats's own star metaphor in 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' (Drew 85), his sonnet 'Blue! 'Tis the life of heaven...' (DeVane *Handbook* 267), and an anonymous sonnet sent to Keats and published in Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats* of 1848 (1: 254, Altick 'Memo' 66). More obviously, the exotic dye imagery, the lush description of Solomon's palace and the secondary metaphor of the bluebell and the bee imitate Keats's sensuous, detailed style. The tetrameter and trimeter lines, the conspicuous rhymes with either three rhyming words or double rhymes, and the reference to Solomon, the alleged author of the 'Song of Songs', make this an atypically lyrical Browning poem.

Nevertheless, 'Popularity' does not seriously fulfil the promise of conforming to the more conventional melodic and descriptive style announced in the letter to Milsand of 24 February 1854:

I am writing, a sort of first step toward popularity (for me!), 'Lyrics,' with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see. (Bentzon 115)

Browning employs instead here the same strategy of usurping and rejecting his opponents' discourse as in 'Of Pacchiarotto'. This accounts for the paradox of drawing on a predecessor's metaphors and style in the enunciation while advocating innovativeness in the enounced. There were enough reasons for Browning to identify with Keats: both were depreciatingly labelled 'Cockney poets'³⁸ and rejected for their stylistic novelty; as seen in the previous section, Browning drew a parallel between his

³⁸ On Browning's relation to the Cockney school, see Woolford and Karlin's note to his 'Cockney Anthology' (*Poems* 1: 93-4), which demonstrates his ironical distance from that style.

own and Keats's legendary lack of fame;³⁹ and Keats's concept of the 'camelion Poet' in his letter of 27 October 1818 to Richard Woodhouse, published in Milnes's *Life*, foreshadowed Browning's objective poet. Still, the model of a poet whose style is so very different from his own remains an odd choice. Jerome Thale suggests that Browning is not copying Keats here, but that his target is the Spasmodics, the popular poets in the early 1850s who imitated Keatsian imagery and were by both reviewers and contemporary poets considered as followers of Keats (349-52). Thale backs his interpretation with EBB's correspondence of 1853 (353). Speaking for both herself and Browning, she criticises the 'imagery in excess' in the poems of the Spasmodic Alexander Smith. She expresses their surprise at his popularity and thus prefigures the argument of 'Popularity' (Kenyon *Letters of EBB* 2: 134). The second part of the poem would thus be a pastiche of the Spasmodic style.

Even if Browning did not design the poem as a specific attack on the Spasmodics, he is clearly intent on demonstrating in his use of imagery and rhyme that he can write in a more popular style, as this was also practised by contemporaries like Tennyson or the Pre-Raphaelites. He thereby implies that he is not compelled into but consciously chooses the role of the obscure, unpopular poet. The stylistic rupture in the last two stanzas, which culminates in the question 'What porridge had John Keats?', emphasises that he has only adapted to an ornate lyrical style throughout the poem in order to finally reject it. This rejection already shines through in his characteristically elliptical syntax throughout the poem, which puzzled Ruskin so much and was definitely not chosen to make his work more popular. The demonstration of what Browning can but does not want to do in the enunciation makes 'Popularity' a more sophisticated poem than the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto*, in which he proclaims in the enounced that he could write 'cowslip' poetry but decides not to (xxiv).

Browning's alternative for reconciling the tension between his own values and the public's taste, above all their call for self-expression in poetry, is the Romantic Irony of 'At the "Mermaid"'. Here he can get away with voicing the most subjective and controversial opinions in the enounced because they are attributed to a less than reliable speaker who is drunk. Some works after *Pacchiarotto* follow this pattern of offsetting affirmative statements with the partial undermining of the speaker elsewhere.

³⁹ Browning refers to Keats when he discusses his 'sensitiveness to criticism' in the letter of 11 February 1845 (*Corr.* 10: 71).

La Saisiaz, Browning's next publication, gives a confident outline of Browning's faith, but stresses – though not in a humorous tone – the subjectivity of his point of view. Similarly, *Ferishtah's Fancies* is the most dogmatic articulation of his optimistic philosophy, despite the mask of a speaker from a different cultural background and the substitution of the literal subjects with parable. Jerry Herron argues that the overly confident tone of the body of the collection in combination with Ferishtah's banal analogies makes the text verge on self-parody (21). The claim by Irvine and Honan (506-7) as well as Herron (23) that the framing poems *in propria persona* also cast an ironic perspective on Ferishtah's philosophy deserves some attention. These two poems undercut both the content and the form of the body of the collection: the 'Epilogue' expresses Browning's fear that his religious optimism might be a delusion caused by his personal experience of human love,⁴⁰ whereas the 'Prologue' with its fanciful extended metaphor can be read as a critical observation of Browning's use of metaphor to mediate abstract ideas in the collection.

Browning does not take a critical look at his main literary method in the collection without at the same time making the readers aware of their limitations and prejudices, in this case their expectations regarding the explanatory prologue. The poem develops a more subtle alternative to the obviously satirical criticism of the public's criteria of reception in *Pacchiarotto*. Browning seems once more to be inspired by Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of the 1815 *Poems*, which condemns the inadequacy of the metaphor of literary 'taste' because it is 'taken from a passive sense of the human body, and transferred to things which are in their essence not passive, – to intellectual acts and operations' (*Poems* 2: 945). Wordsworth insists instead on the necessity of 'the exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the Reader' (*Poems* 2: 946), a phrase which Browning echoes in his demand for the reader's 'co-operating fancy' in the preface to *Paracelsus*. The 'Prologue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies* playfully takes up the food metaphor to censure the public's preference for the kind of didactic poetry which does not require any effort on the part of the reader.

On the level of the enounced, Browning seems willing to accommodate the passive reader. Unlike most of his poems *in propria persona*, the 'Prologue' is no

⁴⁰ The mist imagery in the poem seems to refer back to EBB's letter of 21 April 1846 (*Corr.* 12: 265) and Browning's reply the next day (*Corr.* 12: 269).

utterance in a fictional dramatic situation, which the reader overhears, but a direct address to the 'Reader' (1). We therefore do not expect a discrepancy between enounced and enunciation which would undermine the speaker's voice. Since metaphor facilitates the understanding of an abstract idea in terms of a concrete concept taken from ordinary experience, it is a good device to acquaint an unsophisticated addressee with the complexities of a poetic theory. The correspondence between Browning's skewer metaphor and the import and form of *Ferishtah's Fancies* is straightforward: bread, sage and the ortolan – a singing bird – correspond to 'Sense, sight and song' (30). The collection thus purports to be a mixture of meaning, vision and lyricism through the combining the discursive style of the poems about Ferishtah, the spiritual insights of the parables which they include and the love lyrics which are attached.⁴¹ The emphasis on the importance of *all* elements is a discreet hint that Ferishtah's didacticism is in itself not enough. It is not an all-encompassing mirror of the author's views, but needs to be complemented. The repeated injunction to bite through all three ingredients (19, 25) calls for an active effort to grasp all elements at once, especially since the dish needs to be masticated and digested, i.e. it is not immediately accessible.

The speaker does not reflect on the paradox that he wants to incite his readers to read actively but that his lecturing makes an active reading of his own utterance superfluous. The wordy explanations contrast sharply with Browning's habitual concise and hermetic style. The speaker appears over-anxious to drive home his point: '[...] and here's the point I fain would press, – / Don't think I'm tattling!' (9-10) The purpose of the utterance as well as the vehicle and tenor of the skewer metaphor are spelled out at the very beginning, when he says: 'for my plan's / To – Lyre with Spit ally' (3-4); and the parallel is repeated with such insistence in the line 'So with your meal, my poem' (29) that the dullest reader cannot miss it. Even the bracketed secondary metaphor about drying flowers in books (15-16) includes another hint at the original tenor through the pun on 'leaf'. The metre, an alternation of iambic pentameter with a swift feminine two-beat line, is the same as in 'A Grammarian's Funeral' and would therefore be appropriate for a serious statement on poetics (Karlin 'Ortolans' 159). However, the first rhyming pair of short lines, the dactylic triple rhyme 'Italy – Spit

⁴¹ Cf. the ideal of 'an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought' when Browning explains the title *Bells and Pomegranates* in his note in the eighth number of the series (quoted from Woolford and Karlin *Poems 2*: 474).

ally', at once establishes a light tone. The abundance of other comic devices in the enunciation – such as rhymes including two words ('song there' / 'wrong there', 30, 32), clumsy repetitions ('how cooks there cook them', 3, 'sage-leaf [...] leaf engage leaf', 14, 16) or the nonce-word 'thirdling' (18) – shows that the utterance is either manipulated by the superior consciousness of the author, who distances himself from the speaker, or that the speaker himself is not serious.

This does not mean that the poetics voiced on the level of the enounced are not to be taken seriously. On the contrary, there is, for instance, more to the inspiration for the food metaphor than appears in the enounced, which accounts for it by an association of opposites: in the environment of Gressoney, a country of 'eggs, milk, cheese, fruit [which] suffice so well / For gourmandizing' (35-6), the speaker is reminded of the savoury ortolan recipe (Karlin 'Ortolans' 150). Bearing in mind the equation of strong aroma with demanding, intellectual poetry in the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto* and in the civet passage at the end of *Sordello* (see Chapter V.1.4), these ordinary victuals can also be read as a metaphor for the contemporary taste for simplistic, insipid poetry, which suffices to satisfy the general public and contrasts with the pungent flavour of the 'sage-leaf' (14), i.e. the 'wise book' (Karlin 'Ortolans' 150) that is Browning's work.

The ironic presentation of a speaker who does not practise what he preaches but who nonetheless gives utterance to Browning's poetics demonstrates the author's awareness of the difficulty of living up to his own high standards. The poem is both an affirmation of his demanding poetics and a parody of his conflicting temptation to write easy didactic poetry as he does in the body of the collection. The speaker is not able to implement his theory of the co-operating reader in his utterance, but the author is, because an active comparison between enounced and enunciation is necessary to see the speaker's blind spot and to appreciate the Romantic Irony of the poem. This confirms once more the constant paradox inherent in all of Browning's poems which engage with his critics. His intention in writing is to attain a better reception among the general audience, and all poems reveal the public's prejudices. But a defining feature of the self-parody of Romantic Irony is that an insensitive reader is disoriented by its contradictions and cannot tell jest from seriousness (Schlegel 'Lyceum' frag. 108). Again, Browning's desire to gain a wider popularity is not strong enough to make him

abandon his sophisticated style and subtle irony, which are only truly accessible to the ideal sensitive reader who appreciates him already.

IV.6. The Use of Prefaces, Prologues and Epilogues

A paradox similar to the one in the 'Prologue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies* governs Browning's overall use of prologues and epilogues, a category to which so many of the poems *in propria persona* belong. The mature Browning often had recourse to them, but as the enunciation frequently undermines the enounced, they do not provide the unambiguous authorial statement which one would expect from this kind of text.

In contrast, for his early poems he used defensive prefaces, notes and, in the Mill copy of *Pauline*, self-annotation. This elaborate paratextual apparatus can be explained partially as a self-conscious imitation of Romantic models, such as Shelley's and Keats's prefaces, but they also reveal a genuine anxiety about the readers' response. Browning's strenuous endeavour to influence reception after the completion of the main text is most obvious in the paratexts surrounding *Pauline*. The purpose of the preface to the 1868 *Poetical Works* (also included in the 1888 edition) was to defend the publication of the poem and the lack of revisions, whereas the note added in 1888 justified the belated alterations. The 'Note' to *Paracelsus*, where Browning supplements his translation from the *Biographie Universelle* with what he calls 'a few notes, in order to correct those parts which do not bear out my own views of the character of Paracelsus', is another instance of Browning trying to direct the reader towards a certain interpretation of his text (cf. Hair *Language* 77-8).

After the 1863 dedication to *Sordello*, Browning became more reluctant to use prefaces to expound his dramatic method, with his emphasis on character study and the co-operation of the reader, as he had done in the prefaces to *Paracelsus* (1835) and to *Strafford* (1837) as well as in the 'Advertisement' to *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842). The prefaces to *Paracelsus* and *Strafford* were omitted from subsequent editions. The 'Advertisement' to *Dramatic Lyrics* was converted into an inconspicuous note in the 1863 collected edition, which divided the poems into three groups, and the preface to the 1868 edition only included the concise quotation from the 'Advertisement' "poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine".

The preface to the 1872 *Selections from the Poetical Works* marked an important transition. Browning proclaimed that, unlike '[a] few years ago', he now renounced the attempt to vindicate his poetry and to explain his theory because he felt he had finally found the co-operating reader he had sketched out in the preface to *Paracelsus*:

Time has kindly co-operated with my disinclination to write the poetry and the criticism besides. The readers I am at last privileged to expect, meet me fully half-way; [...] I conceive there may be helpful light, as well as re-assuring warmth, in the attention and sympathy I gratefully acknowledge.⁴²

The heightened perceptiveness of his readers was probably the reason why he believed he could move on to a more unusual and more demanding self-dramatisation in that volume. In the handwritten note in the Mill copy of *Pauline*, he had already mentioned the idea of splitting himself into multiple dramatic characters (see Chapter I.4). In 1872, he returned to the dramatic approach, but tried through an ordering of his poems which was not based on chronology – and which did not correspond to the tripartite structure of the 1863 collection – to create one *coherent* fictional self:

[...] by simply stringing together certain pieces on the thread of an imaginary personality, I present them in succession, rather as the natural development of a particular experience than because I account them the most noteworthy portion of my work. Such an attempt was made in the volume of selections from the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: to which – in outward uniformity, at least – my own would venture to become a companion.

So, after having turned his wife into a dramatic *persona* both in her posthumous *Selections* of 1865, which he edited (Woolford *Revisionary* 94-6), and in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* through suggesting a dramatic title for her self-expressive love poems,⁴³ he now explicitly presented *himself* as a fictional character, 'Browning the poet'. The 1872 preface thus suggests that Browning conceives of the speaker of the prologues and epilogues *in propria persona* as an 'imaginary personality' who does not fully coincide with the real author.

As prefaces became less frequent and less programmatic, prologues and epilogues emerged. It seems that Browning first experimented with the device in *Men*

⁴² The development towards greater popularity is anticipated in *R&B* (1868-69) in the apostrophes to the 'British Public, ye who like me not' (I, 1379) and to the 'British Public, who may like me yet' (XII, 835).

⁴³ These are examples of how Browning countered EBB's efforts to make him adopt her style in his poetry. His method of influencing her is different from hers, in that he imposes his dramatic framework on the texts *after* the act of composition and without changing her wording.

and *Women* within the frame of individual poems. In contrast to the first two monologue collections, some poems are not just prefixed with indications of time and / or place but have more elaborate bracketed subtitles, such as ‘Up at a Villa – Down in the City (As Distinguished by an Italian Person of Quality)’, “‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (See Edgar’s song in *Lear*)’ or ‘Andrea del Sarto (Called “The Faultless Painter”)’ . ‘Cleon’ and ‘The Twins’ have biblical epigraphs, which function as authorial comments.⁴⁴ The omniscient epilogist to ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’, who sees into Blougram’s thoughts and evaluates him, is unique in Browning’s monologues and is replaced in the next collection by the more evasive system of multiple fictional frames in ‘A Death in the Desert’.

‘Holy-Cross Day’ and ‘The Heretic’s Tragedy’ are framed by pseudo-historical documents and explanatory notes signed ‘R.B.’,⁴⁵ which combine to give the poems the mocking appearance of authentic utterances and present the author in the *persona* of a meticulous researcher of historical facts. The device reflects a change in the idea of the poem as a fragment surrounded by fictional paratexts (exemplified by *Pauline*) towards that of authorial historical annotations (as practised by Byron in *Childe Harold* or Walter Scott in the later editions of the *Waverley* novels).⁴⁶ However, it does not take a particularly critical reader to notice that ‘Holy-Cross Day’ is not, as the introduction claims, ‘What the Jews really said, on being driven to church’ and that ‘The Heretic’s Tragedy’ is not the corrupted text of an interlude written by the ‘Master Gysbrecht’ mentioned in the epigraph.⁴⁷ The two poems seem to represent a first step towards what I will argue in the next two chapters to be Browning’s partially undermined self-presentation as a historian in *R&B*, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* and ‘Cenciija’. In comparison, in his statements claiming historical accuracy in the earlier works – i.e. the note to *Paracelsus*, the preface to *Strafford*, and the note to *King Victor and King*

⁴⁴ The only early instance of an epigraph is the quotation from the *Dictionary of all Religions*, which was prefixed to ‘Johannes Agricola’ for its first publication in the *Monthly Repository* of January 1836 and omitted from all subsequent publications.

⁴⁵ The signature in ‘The Heretic’s Tragedy’ was omitted from editions after 1855, whereas the less obviously fictional ‘Holy-Cross Day’ kept its signature.

⁴⁶ Harriet Martineau’s diary entry documents her awareness that Browning is at the watershed between these two modes: ‘Browning called. “Sordello” will soon be done now. Denies himself preface and notes. He must choose between being historian or poet. Cannot split interest. I advised him to let the poem tell its own tale’ (207).

⁴⁷ A historical inaccuracy which seems to be unintentional is Browning’s footnote which credits Pope Gregory XVI with the abolition of conversionist sermons. Rowena Fowler points out that they were only discontinued in 1847 under the papacy of Pius IX (253-4).

Charles –, Browning does not yet display such an ironic stance and still seriously lays claim to offering correct, albeit imaginative, representations of historical events.

The frequency of prologues and epilogues to collections increases towards the end of Browning's career, developing from first only an epilogue (*Men and Women*, *Dramatis Personae*) to both prologue and epilogue (*Fifine at the Fair*, *Pacchiarotto*, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, *Asolando*). The *Parleyings* even reverses the pattern by turning the main text into the space for Browning's utterance and leaving only the prologue and epilogue to fictional speakers. Browning abandons prefatory prose discourse, whose form confines it to an extrafictional expression of the authorial intention, for verse, which cannot formally be distinguished from the fictional universe of his poetry and might therefore not be a serious token of authorial intention.⁴⁸ The interpretation that the enounced of these poems is not necessarily a serious revelation of Browning's self is strengthened by the fact that 'One Word More', Browning's first epilogue to a collection, is the poem in which he confesses that he cannot express himself properly in poetry. The recourse to ambiguous prologues and epilogues may indicate that the young poet's initial belief that the audience must assimilate the authorial intention is superseded by a loss of faith in the author's authority and absolute point of view. The later poems *in propria persona* *La Saisiaz* and the 'Epilogue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies*, in which Browning concedes the subjectivity of his point of view, also support this reading. The prologues and epilogues thus invite the reader to question the apparently reliable 'authorial' voice and his own attitude towards it. They thereby become means of second order observation of their own subgenre and of habits of reception.

A precedent for Browning's ambiguous prologues and epilogues might be the convention of authorial novel prefaces which are not meant to be taken seriously. Their function is usually to disavow intentions which may not be publicly declared, e.g. in Laclos' *Liaisons dangereuses*, or to pass off novels as purportedly true histories.⁴⁹ Browning seems to make fun of the latter in 'Holy-Cross Day' and 'The Heretic's Tragedy'. A rarer subcategory, mainly represented by Diderot, presents the author as a

⁴⁸ Chapter V.2 will show that the verse form and the integration of Books I and XII into the twelve-book structure of *R&B* are important clues that the poet-speaker is not identical with the superior consciousness of the implied author.

⁴⁹ See Genette (*Seuils* 255ff.).

character in a fictional dialogue.⁵⁰ Thus the character 'R' in Rousseau's dialogic preface to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* affirms that he is the editor of a real correspondence, but internal contradictions in his utterance convey that he is really the author of a fictional novel. This form seems to be echoed in Browning's poems which provide one side of a fictional dialogue, but the obvious unreliability of 'R' is replaced by a subtler undermining of the speaker 'Browning'.

There is another tradition of not quite serious authorial self-defence which comes even closer to Browning's method in *Pacchiarotto*: the ancient dramatic prologue and epilogue. 'Artemis Prologuizes', which was originally intended as a theatrical prologue, demonstrates that Browning was familiar with the convention. The terms *prologos* and *epilogos* derive from Attic drama, meaning the direct address to the audience before and after the play by a special character who stands for, and might originally have been played by, the playwright. Especially in later Roman comedy, their function was not only to summarise the plot but also to give the author a platform for engaging in a general defence of his work and a polemical argument with critics, independent of the play to which they were affixed. This authorial intervention had been developed from the *parabasis* of Attic Old Comedy, situated at the centre of the drama, and shifted to the frames of the play. Though treated in a coarser manner, the themes raised by the *parabases* of Aristophanes, the main representative of Old Comedy, resemble Browning's in *Pacchiarotto*: hyperbolic self-praise matched with the denigration of rivals; satirical attacks on the audience's taste and the decisions of the jury which judges the play; a display of conflicting desires to please the common crowd and the sophisticated intellectual audience. An indication that Browning did read Aristophanes closely while writing *Pacchiarotto* is the epigraph to the 'Epilogue' from *Plutus* 807-8. Moreover, Browning wrote the first poems for *Pacchiarotto* in 1874, around the same time as *Aristophanes' Apology*. In his reading for that poem, he must have rediscovered Aristophanes' *parabases*. Although *Aristophanes' Apology* appears at first sight to be a sequel to the defence of Euripides in *Balaustion's Adventure*, with whom Browning explicitly identifies in 'Of Pacchiarotto' (581), Browning's imitation of Aristophanes would not be surprising. *Aristophanes' Apology* draws analogies

⁵⁰ Both the French Enlightenment literary dialogues and Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, from which Browning seems have evolved the dramatic monologue, stem from the tradition of Lucian's dialogues with the dead. Given Walter Savage Landor's influence on Browning, his interest in these dialogic prefaces would not be surprising.

between Aristophanes' poetry and Browning's (see Chapter II.5), and is in fact a presentation of two opposing poetics that stresses the importance and interrelatedness of both (Roberts 'Euripidaristophanizing' 42-3).

Another possible inspiration for Browning's imitation of Aristophanes' *parabases* is Schlegel. He calls the *transcendental buffoon* of Romantic Irony, who both affirms and undermines himself, a '*permanente Parekbase*' ('permanent *parabasis*', 'Lyceum' frag. 42) and repeatedly refers to Aristophanes' wit in his fragments (e.g. 'Athenäum' frags 154, 156, 244). If he had come across this idea and consciously tried to apply it in his poetry, Browning with his thorough knowledge of Greek drama would very probably have gone back to Aristophanes' *parabases*. Hence it would be even more plausible to read the poems *in propria persona*, and especially those in *Pacchiarotto*, as the author's consciously ironic undermining of his speaker.

The inspirations for Browning's subversion of his own voice which I have put forward are derived from drama, the novel and their paratext. The fact that, in order to find instances of literary texts which call into question the authority of the author, Browning has to turn to genres other than poetry suggests how enrooted the confidence in the authorial voice still is in the post-Romantic context in which he is writing. It is therefore not surprising that Browning finds it necessary to use several poems in *Pacchiarotto* to revise the public's concept of poetry in general and to demonstrate that the poem *in propria persona* is not restricted to the sincere expression of personal feelings. However, this chapter has shown that, while he finds an engaging way of repudiating the self-expressive ideal, the influence of Romanticism on both the public and his own poetics also makes it difficult for Browning to replace the Romantic discourse of self-conceptualisation and to reinvent himself in a convincing way as a new poet.

V. BROWNING AS NARRATOR

Besides the dramatic monologue – and discounting his abortive attempts in the 1830s and 1840s to establish himself as a playwright –, Browning's other preferred genre is the narrative poem. In the case of *Sordello*, which was written between 1833 or 1834 and 1840, the choice of this form was probably made under the impact of the success of Walter Scott's narrative romances and Byron's long poems in the early decades of the century. When Browning returned to the long poem in the 1860s, the novel had emerged as the predominant literary genre. We can see him adapting the conventions of specific novelistic subgenres to poetry, such as the sensation novel in the case of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country (RCNCC)* and *The Inn Album*. However, his narrative poems frequently disappoint the expectations raised by their genre: *Sordello*'s non-chronological structure disrupts the continuity of the narrative; *R&B* and *RCNCC* include long dramatic monologues, and although they rely on the contemporary narrative mode of realism, they implicitly call it into question.

Browning's three narrative poems which are clearly *in propria persona*, *Sordello*, *R&B* and *RCNCC*, are indeed not very different from most of his works, in which the factual events of the plot are less important than the scrutiny of the psyche of a dramatic character or speaker. Despite the larger space given to the hero of the narrative, the poet who tells the story is the hidden centre of attention. Robert Felgar even claims that there is generally 'little if any suspense in poems narrated by "Browning"' since this 'would distract the reader from concentrating on the poet's effort to establish an ontological status for himself through his literary self-projections' (88). Similarly, Mary Rose Sullivan states that 'the real hero of *The Ring and the Book* is the poet, and to indicate that he is using himself as a type of the creative artist, Browning presents himself as a character – the leading character – in the drama by which old fact becomes new truth' (18). A look at Browning's lyric poems confirms that he reverses generic conventions fundamentally: whereas the lyric, as the genre traditionally reserved for the poet's self-expression, is in most cases spoken by a dramatic character, the narrative poem can become the locus of the poet's self-observation. The poet is an observer who verbalises his observations in his poem. His act of narration necessarily implies an interpretation and shows how he chooses,

transforms and makes sense of the factual data available to him (in *Sordello*, *R&B*, *RCNCC*) or how he structures his argument (in *La Saisiaz*). In addition to the mediating narrative voice, which always conveys a suggestion of the poet's self, digressions, authorial intrusions and comments allow the reader to become a second order observer of Browning's conceptualisation of the world and his identity.

Sordello, *R&B* and *RCNCC* also resemble each other in that they dismiss the narrative subgenre of the autobiography. The allusion to Rousseau's *Confessions* and the condemnation of the sonnet in 'House' (see Chapter IV.3) are already indications that Browning repudiates conventional modes of self-conceptualisation. The writer's most elaborate constitution of his identity by means of a literary text traditionally happens through the retrospective narration of his own life. After *Pauline*, which is presented as a therapeutic autobiographical narrative of a speaker very much like his author, Browning repeatedly chooses the long narrative, but avoids autobiography. This does not mean, however, that he altogether rejects autobiography in the narrative poems. *Sordello*, in which his concern is still to find his artistic identity, uses the autobiographical narrative, but projects it onto the hero as Browning's *alter ego*. Yet the poem already subverts the conventional pattern of the *Bildungsroman* in that the return to a salutary original wholeness is no longer possible for *Sordello*, whose death is the result of the irreconcilable conflict between his political and artistic ambitions. The digression in Venice in Book III presents a fragment of the narrator's autobiography: the conversion scene, which is the turning point in the autobiographical plot.

In the much later *R&B* (published 1868-69) and *RCNCC* (1873), the autobiographical pattern is no longer needed for Browning's self-constitution because his objective aesthetics are more stable. The narrator is completely detached from the plot. He still creates his self through a narrative, but a narrative which is not about himself. In *R&B*, the equivalent of the autobiographical conversion scene with its epiphanic insight happens in relation to the Franceschini plot, when the narrator reads the *Old Yellow Book*, and not in relation to Browning's life. The poem offers a few glimpses of his life-story in the invocations of EBB and the addresses to the 'British Public', but these hints are even more sketchy than the already fragmented outline of his artistic development in *Sordello*. All the mature Browning needs to shape his

identity as a poet is to present the act of creating the poem within the work itself. Depicting the creative act reinforces the poet's sense of his importance, although the enounced might not draw attention to this as in 'Fra Lippo Lippi', Browning's only other poem in which an artist appears within his own work. When Lippo enters one of his paintings and is confronted with his own creation (359ff.), he suddenly appears to be humble and insecure. But through the angel's speech which culminates in the declaration "*Iste perfecit opus!*" (377), he celebrates his creative powers.

Ryals has interpreted *Sordello* as Browning's most radical performance in the mode of Romantic Irony (*Becoming* Chapter 4). I want to argue here that in their presentation of the narrator and his self-conscious metapoetic reflections, *R&B*, and to a lesser extent, *RCNCC* also use Romantic Irony. Even in the meditative poem *La Saisiaz*, which shares important characteristics with the other poems in this chapter, the author partially distances himself from the enounced in a way which resembles Romantic Irony. The fact that all four poems focus on the genesis (Schlegel's *becoming*) of the text in the poet's mind, and that the narrative poem is the poetic subgenre which comes closest to the novel, whose arabesque form Schlegel considers the most appropriate genre for Romantic Irony and the artist's self-presentation ('Athenäum' frag. 116; 'Brief über den Roman'), already suggest a closeness to Schlegel's mode. The three later poems which I will analyse play at using strategies which are typical of Browning's poetic mode and way of thinking but which are simultaneously called into question: historiography and realism in *R&B*, realism and naturalism in *RCNCC*, and argument based on faith in *La Saisiaz*. Since these strategies are dramatically enacted, Browning can advocate his method in the enounced and at the same time acknowledge its limitations in the enunciation. Through the indeterminacy of Romantic Irony, he can thus escape the accusation of being too absolute.

V.1. *Sordello*

In comparison to the methods of self-observation used in Browning's two earlier long poems, *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, *Sordello* may appear as formally regressive. Self-observation in *Pauline* is distanced through the hetero-observation of a fictional speaker, who is quite obviously an *alter ego* of his creator. *Paracelsus* is also a

reflection of Browning, but the distance between author and character is widened through the historical setting and the dramatic form. In both texts, the author's projection of his own problems onto his hero, through which he avoids the danger of a paralysing self-consciousness, seems to be inspired by Romantic models such as 'Alastor' or *Manfred*. The view taken by Thomas Collins that Browning's scrutinising of his moral-aesthetic problems is executed with an increasing detachment throughout the first three long poems (*Moral-Aesthetic Theory* 46) is certainly supported by the formal difference between *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. As regards *Sordello*, Collins argues that there is an increasing detachment because the hero is 'not a fictional substitute for Browning' (46) – an interpretation which has been disputed by several studies of the poem – and that the author distances himself from the character's failure. However, in the conclusion of his chapter on *Sordello*, Collins remarks: '*Sordello* is the most objective of Browning's three major early works, but paradoxically, it is also the most revealing one' (77). This paradox arises from the fact that Browning's distancing self-projection onto the hero happens alongside a direct self-observation through the inclusion of himself as narrator, which reintroduces the risk of Romantic solipsism without critical distance. Browning himself underlined the exceptional nature of this unmediated self-expression in a letter to Ruskin of 1 February 1856:

Of all my things, the single chance I have had of speaking in my own person – not dramatically – has been in a few words in the course of 'Sordello' [...] (Browning 'Letter to Ruskin')

The question is therefore whether, and if so, how the poem objectifies Browning's self-observation through the narrator.

Sordello certainly stages a more complex self-observation than *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. The account of Browning's crisis of artistic identity is enhanced by the observation of the process of composition of the poem itself, the main focus of self-observation in *R&B* and *RCNCC*. The fact that '[i]t is a poem about a poet writing a poem about a poet writing poems' is reason enough for Lionel Stevenson to proclaim *Sordello* the 'Key Poem of the Victorian Age' (278). It is finally the poem in and through which Browning develops his mature poetics, the 'moral-aesthetic synthesis which is to remain the principle of his system of thought throughout the rest of his career' (Collins *Moral-Aesthetic Theory* 77). It thus invites the reader to observe the

relation between the poetics voiced in the enounced and the execution in the enunciation of the text itself and in Browning's subsequent works.

A central concept in the poetics expounded in *Sordello* is the anticipation of the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective poet. The narrator's juxtaposition of the two poets in Book I, 462-566 is free from self-reference and presents the negative variants and dangers of *both* poets – an aspect which is only touched upon in the 'Essay on Shelley' in the late, 'decadent' phases of both types. Nevertheless, as Woolford and Karlin observe, *Sordello* betrays a certain ironic distance from the subjective poet which was not present in *Paracelsus* (*Poems* 1: 433). The dichotomy is combined with a hierarchy of genres which distinguishes three manners of literary mediation. The office of poets has been for

The worst of us, to say they so have seen;
The better, what it was they saw; the best,
Impart the gift of seeing to the rest [...] (III, 840-2)

To this corresponds a parallel theory about the historical development of poetry, voiced by the hero in V, 560-631. It ascends from what the running titles to Book V term as the 'epoist', who, like Dante, mediates moral values through a work in which he appears as a character, via the 'dramatist, or so to call him, analyst', who, like Shakespeare, is absent from his work, which presents all aspects of human nature, to the 'synthesist' poet, who adds psychological insight to the epoist's abstract categories and the dramatist's external action. Both hierarchies assume a progression towards decreasing authorial intervention and increasing reader participation. Ideally, poet and reader co-operate, so that the reader shares in and reduplicates the author's creative process. Hardly any verbal communication is necessary. They 'talk as brothers talk, / In half-words, call things by half-names' (V, 605-6).¹

These poetics seem to pose two problems. Firstly, the theory appears to contain a *non sequitur*: Ryals remarks that the term for the supreme poets who let the reader participate in the creative act, the 'Makers-see' (III, 902), combines the ideas of 'seer'

¹ The ultimate source of this concept seems to be Schlegel's '*Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie*' defined in 'Lyceum' frag. 112 and 'Athenäum' frag. 125 (see also Ryals *Becoming* 114), although Browning probably encountered it in such mediations of German thought as Coleridge's demand for a 'perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader' (*Biographia Literaria* 177) and Carlyle's notion of the reader as an active participant in the construction of textual meaning at the end of *The French Revolution* (*Works* 4: 323, see also Latané '*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 32-3).

and ‘fashioner’, Browning’s alternative terms for the subjective and the objective poet in the ‘Essay on Shelley’ (*Becoming* 265, n. 27). Despite the general development of the hierarchy towards objectivity, the highest ideal in *Sordello* thus seems to be a coexistence of objective and subjective faculties in one poet. The surprising turn at the top of the hierarchy may be Browning’s way of reconciling his opposing tendencies at the expense of consistency, implying that he still values Romantic visionary poetry but decides that the method of mediation must be that of objective poetry.² However, a work both objective and subjective is not the highest ideal in the ‘Essay’, where ‘the mere running-in of the one faculty upon the other’ in one work is inferior to a poet’s ability to produce purely objective and subjective works in ‘successive perfect works’ (1003). I would argue that this is also the case in *Sordello* and that the ‘Maker-see’ is a purely objective poet. In fact, Ryals’s grammar is suspect here, since ‘maker’ does not refer to the creation of the poem but means that the poet enables the reader to perceive something. This important shift in emphasis from the *poet* as seer to the *reader* as seer implies the poet’s self-effacement, so that ‘Maker-see’ poetics appear in fact as a logical extension of objective poetry.

Secondly, there is the question of if and how this theory is implemented by the poem itself. In the revised versions of 1863 and after, the narrative voice interrupts Sordello’s speech on the progression of poetry when he mentions the synthesist poet with the exclamation: ‘... Why, he writes *Sordello*!’ (V, 620, 1888 version) This seems to imply that the text itself embodies the ideal of synthesist poetry. For a reader familiar with the 1840 text and its reception, this addition is highly ironic, as the commentators’ puzzled reactions to that edition had so clearly shown that Browning had not managed to act as a ‘Maker-see’ for his readers. Within the logic of the fictional situation of the narrator’s utterance, this intervention is paradoxical, since his need to spell out *Sordello*’s claim to ‘Maker-see’ poetics shows that he does not trust in his ability to make his audience see for themselves. Many elements of the text show that the narrator does not live up to his own standards: his self-conscious intrusions and digressions again and again remind us of his narrative mediation; up to Book III he is more concerned with his self-observation than with making us see Sordello’s story; and

² The same tension is apparent in Browning’s enthusiasm for EBB’s subjective self-expression through her poetry in the courtship correspondence and his limited efforts to change his objective mode.

although he is less interfering in the second half of the poem, he still explicates the hero's psyche to his audience. His choice of the narrative format, the lowest genre according to the hierarchy in Book V, makes his pretensions to be a 'Maker-see' even more dubious.

These contradictions are so striking that we cannot suppose the author to be unaware of them. Leaving aside the numerous contemporary reviews and some twentieth-century critics – such as Park Honan in his essay on *Sordello* – who interpret this as the author's outright failure, a common explanation is therefore to see the narrator as a *persona* distinct from the author. Christine Froula distinguishes between two voices in the poem, 'the narrator' and 'Browning's own person' (967). She assumes apparently that only the voice in the Venice digression is Browning's own, as opposed to a fictional speaker in the rest of the text, but she never elaborates on this distinction. Similarly, Ryals speaks of 'the poet' and 'the narrator' but confusingly also of the 'poet-narrator', declaring that the Venice digression brings the poet and the narrator *persona* 'into clearer (if not closer) relationship' (*Becoming* 75). Ryals is uncharacteristically vague here because he does not relate the *hovering* of Romantic Irony, which he detects in the poem, to the tension between the textual levels. In my view, much of the poem's Romantic Irony consists in the fact that the author supports the enounced in some passages – and not just in the Venice digression – and lets the enunciation undermine the enounced in other places. The coexisting self-affirmation and self-undermining of Schlegel's *transcendental buffoon* is more apt to account for the narrator's inability to practise what he is preaching than a view like that of Ronald Bush, who sees the narrator as 'Browning's self-caricature' (80). If the poem were a consistent, conscious self-parody, the poetics in the enounced would lose much of their value.

Ryals calls *Sordello*

one of the supreme examples of ironic art. For the poem has as its chief subject the impossibility of writing the kind of poem its author would like to write and yet is, at the same time, a brilliant example of the type of art to which it aspires. ('Browning's Irony' 33)

I agree in general with Ryals's interpretation that the poem does and does not embody synthesist poetry, but think that this requires further qualification. I believe that the poem captures Browning at the point in his artistic development when he becomes able

to implement this new ideal, and that he presents this change by projecting the successive stages of his development which lead up to this change onto distinct characters. This enables him and the reader to observe the temporally distinct facets of his consciousness. The poem displays not only linear development through its obvious theme, 'Sordello's story' (1), and the parallel evolution of the narrator. It is also the synchronous depiction of various stages of Browning's self, which all have different ideas.³ This inconspicuous synchronicity is the reason why critics like Drew have called Browning's stance on aesthetics in *Sordello* 'inconclusive' (41). As we will see, my approach allows us to reconcile conflicting evaluations of *Sordello*, notably the two essays which examine most closely Browning's use of the poem for his self-observation, Michael Yetman's reading of the poem as Browning's successful exorcism of some of his literary tendencies and Robert Columbus and Claudette Kemper's interpretation of the narrator's failure at self-understanding.

The stages of Browning's self which can be distinguished are: 1. Sordello as an *alter ego* of the early, subjective self, who finally feels he has to change but who, despite a significant development, cannot act on that realisation; 2. Eglamor, who represents an early abortive tendency towards objective poetry. He illustrates an earlier stage of self-consciousness compared to Sordello, in that he does not even realise that his kind of poetry is an *impasse*; 3. the narrator as a fictional version of Browning, who has consciously decided to write objective and synthesist poetry, but throughout the poem struggles to do so. He engages in an extended retrospective self-observation in the Venice digression. In relation to the author, he is an earlier self, since self-observation can only happen from a temporal distance, however small; 4. the author, representing the chronologically most recent self and the highest level of consciousness.⁴ Like an autobiographer and his narrated self, Browning's author and narrator *almost* coincide at the end of the narrative. There is, for instance, a significant overlap of narrator and author in the poetics of the Venice digression, but the

³ The non-chronological presentation of Sordello's story hints already that linearity is not the only framework through which development can be assessed. Cf. Gibson's analysis of *Sordello*'s break away from a linear exposition of the plot (*History* 122-32).

⁴ A further level of observation which comprises the author's development after the composition of the text could be added through a comparative analysis of the revised versions, briefly touched upon in section V.1.4. As the scope of this thesis does not permit me to exhaust this aspect, I will concentrate on the 1840 version.

enunciation reveals that the narrator cannot fully implement the theory. He thus represents Ryals's impossibility of writing the ideal poem. In contrast, the author realises his ideal as far as his technique of presentation is concerned. He is an objective poet in that he stages the conflicts which he experienced for observation, above all through the narrator, whom he presents in the dramatic situation of an utterance delivered before a fictional audience. The narrator's 'Why, he writes *Sordello*!' is therefore strictly speaking not self-contradictory, since it is not the narrator but the author, i.e. he who *writes Sordello* as opposed to he who *speaks in Sordello*, who is the synthesist poet. Section V.1.5 will show, however, that in other respects even the author can only approximate his ideal.

The earlier the stage of Browning's self, the easier it is for the reader to observe. We instinctively observe the 'official' hero Sordello, but it takes a higher degree of consciousness to observe the narrator, and an even higher consciousness to focus on the disembodied author. Nevertheless, the strong impression of subjective poetry in the poem is not only due to the fact that the more subjective earlier selves are easier to observe. It is also an indication that – in contrast to his clearly objective poetry of the 1850s – Browning at this point feels a stronger need to avoid an absolutist one-sidedness. The more subjective narrator with his self-conscious intrusions is one technical solution which allows the more objective author to integrate conflicting ideas. Another aspect of this is the self-contradiction of Romantic Irony, which works through the author's alternate endorsement of statements in the enounced in some places and their undermining in other places, which the enunciation makes perceptible for the reader. Herbert Tucker, who reads the poetics of *Sordello* as poetics of openness, identifies multiperspectivism as an ideal means of evading reductive closure:

[...] a play of difference between two or more perspectives, or persons, or parts of a single person, may constitute the richest ground for a writer who would preserve meaning from enclosure. ('Browning, Eglamor' 64)

It is through the play of difference between the chronologically distinct parts of Browning's person that the poem can capture his self in process, the perpetual *becoming* of Romantic Irony.

I will now examine the different levels of Browning's self one by one. The analysis of many central issues, including Sordello's story and his early poetics must

remain only cursory, as my main interest lies in the observation of the narrator, whose consciousness, as it manifests itself in his narration, is always the focus of attention. I will therefore concentrate on Browning's self-observation as it appears in the narrator's observation of the hero and his story and in the observation of his own self and work. The author's observation of the narrator will appear in the peculiarities and contradictions on the level of the enunciation of the narrator's utterance.

V.1.1. Self-Observation through Hetero-Observation: Sordello and Eglaamor

An index of the identification of narrator and hero is the ambiguity about the attribution of speeches in the original version, which generally does not use quotation marks for direct discourse. The most conspicuous instance is the beginning of the Venice digression (III, 599ff.). The 1840 text reads: 'O'er the lagune. / Sordello said once, note [...].' The 1863 and 1865 versions try to clarify who is speaking by introducing quotation marks throughout the text. In III, 599, quotation marks are opened: 'O'er the lagune. / Sordello said once, "Note [...].'" But as these quotation marks are never closed, the unsuccessful effort to resolve the indeterminacy ironically makes it even more radical. The 1868-88 editions eliminate the confusion by attributing the speech to the narrator without mentioning Sordello at all: 'O'er the lagune, being at Venice. / Note, [...].' The intentional blur of narrator and hero in the first version and the probably inadvertent one in 1863-65 support the view that Sordello is Browning's *alter ego*. They document how difficult it is even for the author of 1863 and 1865 to distance his fictional self from his character.

Sordello is not just an obvious mouthpiece for his author, for instance when he complements the narrator's theory on poetry in III, 840-89 in his monologue in V, 560-645. His personal development, which is described in so much detail, also helps the reader to perceive the parallel evolution of the narrator, which has to be pieced together from less coherent information scattered over the whole text. On a large scale, both evolve from a solipsistic self-centredness and concern with beauty towards a discovery of the principle of philanthropic humanitarianism. Minor parallels include their creation of a new poetic language which is not appreciated by the public. When he realises that his Mantuan audience is still only interested in his hero Simon de Montfort

and fails to acknowledge the poem as a manifestation of the poet's creative self (II, 617-35), Sordello is tempted to write poetry which draws attention to himself, but eventually gives in to the Mantuans' taste. Similarly, the poem opens on the narrator's reluctant submission to the audience's taste for accessible narrative poetry (I, 11-34). But through his many self-references throughout the narrative, he manages to enact Sordello's unrealised desire for self-expression, which is spelled out in II, 676-89.

A difference between the two is the temporal delay in Sordello's development. As Yetman notes, it takes him Books IV-VI to catch up with the changes in philosophy and aesthetics which the narrator undergoes within a few moments in Venice in the second half of Book III (91). The most obvious measure of this is the already mentioned parallel between the narrator's hierarchy of poets in III, 840-89 and Sordello's theory about the ages of poetry in V, 560-645. Yet even when he has finally reached the narrator's insight into the inevitability of imperfection and the need to dedicate himself to humanity, Sordello is unable to act on it. He fails twice: first in art, since he does not try to implement the project of humanitarian poetry; then in action, because he dies when he is given the opportunity to become the leader of the Ghibellines and to use this authority to become the people's champion. In view of the fact that the hierarchy in Book III places the man of action above the 'Maker-see' poet (III, 890-901), the hero has here overtaken the narrator as far as good intentions are concerned. His decision to abandon poetry for political action is a stage which the narrator does not even consider for himself, although Sordello's motivation for this course seems not just to be self-sacrifice for a good cause.⁵ Nevertheless, the narrator's vision of himself and the troubadour Eglamor in the 'golden courts' (VI, 793-814) – apparently a reprise of the Heaven to which the 'Makers-see' repair (III, 901-7) – and from which Sordello is absent, implies that the narrator has reached a higher level of poetic perfection than his hero.

Yetman diagnoses this play between similarity and difference as Browning's therapeutic exorcism of his Shelleyan Romantic egotism. The fictional character allows

⁵ At this point, the positive countermodel of the 'artist-Hamlet figure' Sordello (Kwinn 3) is his father Taurello Salinguerra, the representative of the man of action. His disinterestedness contrasts with Sordello's egotism. Salinguerra's 'varied mastery' of the liberal arts of languages, astrology, painting, and music (IV, 575-94) make him akin to Cleon, who masters all genres, but also to Bishop Blougram's dilettantism.

him to isolate and exaggerate some of his own early traits and to play through imaginatively how he would have failed as a poet if he had persisted with these poetics (98). Since what is indeed self-observation is presented as hetero-observation, Browning can set up a more recent self (the narrator) as a positive self-image in contrast to the negative foil of an earlier self (Sordello) and in the role of the author take the stance of a second order observer of both selves. The fact that the earlier and later selves are presented as two physically separate identities stresses Browning's awareness of how radical the turn away from his earlier poetics and self-conceptualisation has to be to realise his new poetics (Yetman 95).

Yetman claims that the objective and the subjective character are present in Browning from the very start of his career and that

Sordello's soul is really Browning's nightmare vision of himself as he thought he might have become had the quandary stemming from his possession of two distinct and contradictory poetic personalities never been resolved. (98)

Sordello is indeed torn between two aspects of his self: the 'Poet', who wants to be true to his 'Will' and imaginative power without having to care about the reception of his work; and the 'Man', who strives for public recognition and wants to satisfy the audience (II, 655-89). However, the subjective / objective dichotomy in him is limited to his relation to the public. For a representation of the objective *literary style* which contrasts with Sordello's subjective poetry, we have to turn to Eglamor as the other hetero-observation of aspects of the younger Browning.

Eglamor has of course several more obvious functions: he is Sordello's predecessor, who is overcome at Palma's court of love; being 'Sordello's opposite' (II, 195), he acts as a foil which underscores similarities between the hero and the narrator; and he represents the lowest level of critical self-consciousness, since he never even considers revising his poetics. Through two pastiches of his style (II, 4-8 and 177-81) and the voice of the critic Naddo, the poem mocks his highly impersonal and artificial 'setting up conceits in Nature's stead!' (II, 12).⁶ The review of his life during his funeral in II, 169-295 characterises him as the representative of the negative version of the objective poet, who was presented in the abstract in I, 462-566. Eglamor

⁶ This is also an implicit criticism of Naddo's recourse to Augustan critical commonplaces. See Woolford and Karlin (*Poems* 1: 462).

considered 'Verse a temple-worship' (II, 197). He was obliged to kneel 'at the shrine' (202) until 'The Power responded' (204), because he lacked the internal source of inspiration of the subjective poet and was 'no genius rare' (II, 213). This is why, after accepting Sordello's poetic supremacy, it is easy for Eglamor to reintegrate into the common crowd: he is not essentially different from them (II, 244-51). Everything said so far suggests that Browning does not see any similarity between himself and Eglamor. Indeed, the abrupt transition at the end of the account of the funeral, 'So much for Eglamor. My own month came' (II, 296), displays the narrator's anxiety to stress this difference.

However, this completely unnecessary self-reference and the juxtaposition of characters from two separate narrative levels raises the suspicion that the vehement denial hides an uncomfortable awareness of similarity. Proof of this cannot be found in the poem itself but in the recurrence of imagery in the paratext. Eglamor is disparagingly described as working in the lowest of the four elements. He is

a poor gnome that, cloistered up,
In some rock-chamber with his agate cup,
His topaz rod, his seed-pearl, in these few
And their arrangement finds enough to do
For his best art. (II, 215-19)

This shows Browning coming to terms with the fact that objective poetry is not reconcilable with the genius aesthetics of the subjective poet. Yet the chamber imagery implies that even the objective poetic character is no safeguard against the elitist solipsism without sympathy for fellow men from which the subjective Sordello suffers at the beginning of Book III. Eglamor, like Sordello, believes that 'The calling [is] marking him a man apart / From men' (II, 220-1). As Woolford and Karlin remark in their note on the passage (*Poems* 1: 477), the rock-chamber imagery is echoed in the 'Essay on Chatterton' of 1842, when Browning praises Chatterton's imaginative responsiveness to uninspiring surroundings, and more faintly in the speculation about the conditions under which the objective poet writes in the 'Essay on Shelley' (1002). But the most revealing parallel is with a letter to EBB of 1 April 1846 (*Corr.* 12: 201-2). Here Browning uses the metaphor for himself, when discussing the unsatisfactory impersonal poetry which he wants to overcome in order to write 'greater works' with the assistance of EBB:

If you take a man from prison and set him free.. do you not probably cause a signal interruption to his previously all-ingrossing occupation, and sole labour of love, of carving bone-boxes, making chains of cherry-stones and other such time beguiling operations – does he ever take up that business with the old alacrity? No! But he begins ploughing, building – (castles he makes, no bone-boxes now) – I may plough & build [...]

This hints that Eglamor is indeed a projection of an aspect of Browning's self. The fact that the description of Eglamor is more appealing than the self-portrayal in the letter indicates that Browning's evaluation of himself as such a bad objective poet becomes more acute after *Sordello*. It suggests that Eglamor does not just represent a very early abortive objective tendency, but that he is also a fearful anticipation of Browning's poetic self after his rejection of subjective poetry in the 1840s, because he is still not quite convinced by this move.

Eglamor's function is even more complex. Although the troubadour dies in Book II, he is referred to at later points in the narrative as a sort of archetypal poet figure, for instance in IV, 230-40. The narrator's increasingly sympathetic attitude towards a poet whom he condemned so strongly in Books I and II serves as an indicator of his change in poetics after the Venice digression. In the final vision of the 'golden courts' (VI, 793-814), the narrator has literally left Eglamor behind him, as Eglamor is the inferior predecessor, whom he has surpassed. Nevertheless, their mutual observation implies mutual recognition. The narrator values Eglamor firstly, because the predecessor who acknowledges the superiority of his follower becomes a version of the ideal admiring audience (see V.1.4); secondly, because, in accordance with the theory of poetic progression in III, 840-89, Eglamor's poetry is the preliminary stage which is the precondition for the narrator's reaching ever higher levels of perfection – and as the parallel with the letter to EBB hints, not merely in a phylogenetic but also in the ontogenetic sense of Browning progressing from a negative self-image as an objective poet to a positive one.

Even though the relationship between Eglamor and *Sordello* is presented as dialectic and that between *Sordello* and the narrator appears to be one of resemblance, Eglamor here eventually supplants the hero as the *alter ego* of the reformed narrator. Although on different levels, both the narrator and Eglamor strive towards the unattainable ideal in the 'golden courts'. Whereas *Sordello* has been condemned for his inaction, this passage emphasises Eglamor's perpetual upward movement despite many

hardships and his awareness that he will never be able to catch up with a poet who chronologically comes after him. The whole passage celebrates Eglamor's unselfish love as it appears in his 'joyous look of love!' (VI, 798).⁷ He is retrospectively vindicated, since the unconditional love for his fellow creatures which he displays here is the root from which Browning's new humanitarian poetics stem. The portrayal of the objective poet through Eglamor thus undergoes a miraculous transformation from an exorcised negative self into a positive model.

V.1.2. Blind Spots in the Narrator's Observation of His Narration

Let us return to Sordello to discover how exactly the narrator operates as an observer. He considers himself superior to his hero at all stages of his story. He can view the events from the distance of six centuries and has a higher state of consciousness than Sordello because he has reached a more advanced stage in his own development. This feeling of superiority is obvious in comments in the first books. For instance, the exclamation 'As if the poppy felt with him!' (I, 705) mocks the naïve identification of the child Sordello with nature. And the apostrophe to Sordello 'Dear monarch, I beseech, / Notice how lamentably wide a breach / Is here! [...]' (II, 415-25) points out the short-sightedness of Sordello's view that the public will admire a poet like him, who is on such a high level of abstraction that they cannot relate to him.

Later on in the poem, the narrator offers his explanations for Sordello's failure at self-realisation. The much discussed analytical passage in VI, 588ff., which identifies Sordello's deficiency as his lack of a mediating power between the infinite abstract and the finite concrete, and which in most critics' view alludes to the concept of the Incarnation of Christ,⁸ is less relevant in the context of my analysis than the diagnosis of Sordello's problem in his speech to Taurello and Palma:

⁷ This attitude is foreshadowed by Eglamor's generous reaction to Sordello's victory at the court of love, after which he humbly accepts to sing his successor's song (II, 247-57).

⁸ See Whitla (14); Ryals (*Becoming* 103-7); Grube (415ff.). For a survey of alternative interpretations, see Tucker (*Beginnings* 231, n. 6).

Yet most Sordello's argument dropped flat
 Through his accustomed fault of breaking yoke,
 Disjoining him who felt from him who spoke:
 [...]
 Be sure, in such delicious flattery steeped,
 His inmost self at the out-portion peeped
 Thus occupied; then stole a glance at those
 Appealed to, curious if her colour rose
 Or his lip moved, while he discreetly urged
 The need of Lombardy's becoming purged
 At soonest of her barons; the poor part
 Abandoned thus missing the blood at heart,
 Spirit in brain, unseasonably off
 Elsewhere! (V, 322-4 and 329-38)

Despite his altruistic devotion to the people's cause, the self-centred subjective artist Sordello is so intent on observing the effect which his eloquence has on his audience, i.e. on observing their second order observation of him, that the purpose of the speech becomes less important. His political oration, which should concentrate on the content level, applies the self-referential aesthetic categories of artistic discourse. The narrator's comment at the end of this speech, 'My poor Sordello! what may we extort / By this, I wonder?' (V, 646), reminds us once more that the hero's too acute self-consciousness is responsible for his failure at political rhetoric.

Ironically, however, a too intense self-observation which makes him neglect Sordello's story is also the reason why the narrator's own utterance is so obscure that it baffles the reader. Similarly, the narrator's dry remark about the effect which Sordello's self-conscious harangue actually has on his listeners, '(For here the Chief [Taurello] immeasurably yawned)' (V, 539), betokens a feeling of ascendancy, but the incident foreshadows the narrator's own sleeping audience at the end of the poem (VI, 870).⁹ The narrator's speech is obviously just as soporific as that of his hero. Another trait which the narrator criticises in Sordello but which they actually share is pointed out by Columbus and Kemper in their analysis of Sordello as a reflection of his creator (258-9). The narrator disdains Sordello's hope to shape the ideas of mankind, a criticism more forcibly expressed through the addition of an exclamation mark in the versions from 1863 onwards: 'Impress his will on mankind, he (the fool!) / Had never even entertained the thought [...]' (IV, 276-7, 1888 version). But the narrator is of course

⁹ 'Suffering humanity' also falls asleep on the narrator's shoulder (III, 758). It should be said in his defence, though, that he encourages her to do so and that he sees her as his muse and never as his audience. Cf. also the sleeping addressee Fortù in 'England and Italy'.

just as intent on imposing *his* will on his own audience. Columbus and Kemper see this as an outright failure:

Self-revelation without self-recognition marks the Speaker as the Speaker mocks Sordello [...] He cannot apprehend the parallels between himself and his 'hero' although he draws the line. (259)

The narrator's blind spot when it comes to applying the categories of hetero-observation to his self-observation is so easy to notice for the reader that the author must be aware of it. Through the parallels with Sordello, the author helps the reader to 'draw the line' which the narrator himself cannot see.

Columbus and Kemper consider both Sordello and the narrator to be failures, since in both cases self-consciousness destroys the Romantic ideal of unselfconscious poetry or action (257). But from the point of view of Browning's new 'brother's speech' poetics which the poem develops, unselfconscious poetry does not appear as an ideal. The presentation of the epitome of the unselfconscious poet, the singing child in VI, 849-65, illustrates this. The child sings 'Some unintelligible words' (VI, 861), which means that he cannot communicate his poetry to men. What is more, the reference to him is preceded by the final summary comment on Sordello's preference for dozing at home instead of 'Singing or fighting elsewhere' (VI, 836), so that the child is likened to the solipsistic poet aloof from humanity that was young Sordello. The child's utter lack of a social impact and interest in an audience, which contrast with Pippa, Browning's next singing child, whose song has an effect on the characters she passes, are vital flaws (Karlin 'Figure of the Singer' 122-3). In addition, Karlin points out an uneasy tension in the portrayal of the child as the supreme poet: he beats 'The lark, God's poet' (VI, 862), but his undesirable lack of consciousness and identity turns him into a static image instead of an individualised poet (*ibid.*). The narrator says he would like to see the child as a better alternative to Sordello's life of action, but this is stated through a hardly convincing question: '[...] cannot I say / He lived for some one better thing?' (VI, 847-8) The child is therefore at best the reminiscence of Browning's earlier abandoned poetic ideal but not his model at the moment of utterance, after his conversion to humanitarian poetics.

Columbus and Kemper spend much of their analysis arguing that the narrator's self-conscious digressions hamper the flow of the narrative, claiming that his ego and

failing powers of communication prevent him from a clear exposition of his plot (259). Of course there are several indications that the narrator is afraid of not being up to his task, such as the repetition of the phrase 'If I should falter now', which frames the reference to Dante (I, 347 and 373). His question 'How shall I phrase it?' (II, 355) seems to betoken an insecurity, but might also be a sly way of drawing attention to his mediating agency. Columbus and Kemper assume that the narrator is incapable of comprehending the complexity of Sordello's character (261) and therefore interpret the opening line, 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told', as an anxious appeal to be believed, which at the same time betrays the narrator's doubts whether he understands the story (263). This line can on the contrary be read as a self-confident reminder of his narrative mediation: 'Who will, may *hear* Sordello's story *told*' (my emphasis), reinforced by its echoes in I, 604 and at the ends of Books III and VI. On both textual levels, there are many other assertive indications of the narrator's creative power which are typical of the *transcendental buffoonery* of Romantic Irony and which contradict Columbus and Kemper's view of the speaker as insecure.

Let us consider the enounced first. The opening stresses the poet's power of choosing his subject:

I single out
Sordello [...]
Letting of all men this one man emerge
Because it pleased me [...] (I, 7-8 and 20-1)

Similarly, Tucker reads the parenthesis about the renaming of Cunizza as Palma (V, 970-6), a highly conscious creative act, as another assertion of the narrator's authorial choice (*Beginnings* 108). The narrator stresses the originality of his creation:

And therefore have I moulded, made anew
A Man, delivered to be turned and tried,
Be angry with or pleased at. (III, 908-10)

At the end of a narrative movement, he emphasises that he structures the narrative:

For thus
Bring I Sordello to the rapturous
Exclaim at the crowd's cry, because one round
Of life was quite accomplished [...] (III, 545-8)

Finally, the self-reference 'My own month came' (II, 296) draws attention to the narrator in the middle of a long passage which is free from interventions.

In the enunciation, a subtle hint is encoded in the use of quotation marks in the 1840 version. They are, as Michael Mason observes, only used 'to indicate quotations of the written word by the poet – either from another part of the text, or from some contemporary writing, imaginary or otherwise' (137-8). An example is the reprise of I, 881-3 in III, 577-9, where it appears in quotation marks in 1840, but not in 1863-88 after Browning's change of policy. For Mason this draws 'attention to distinctions that are nearer to the actual writing of the poem' (138). The absence of quotation marks for normal direct speech thus underscores that all direct speech is created by the narrator.

The text also contains two hidden celebrations of creativity which are not spelled out in the enounced: first, the reference to the monk who writes a secular history and deletes the regulation forbidding this from his monastery's charter (I, 299-308). His stifled creativity parallels that of the narrator who is obliged to fulfil the audience's expectations; second, the canon's narrative about the discovery of Alberic's skeleton (VI, 785-9), which is followed by an apparently unrelated, enthusiastic reference to the local silk-worms, and leads to the narrator's comment: 'Nor he nor I could tell the worthier. Choose!' (VI, 792) This states that the resuscitation of history represented by the disinterment of Alberic is not more important than the narrator's creativity, symbolised by the silkworm which produces a thread out of its own substance, which can be woven into a text(ure).

There is no need to resolve the conflict between the narrator's insecurity about his ability to narrate and the self-confident emphasis on his creativity. They can coexist, since the author's aim is not to present the narrator as a consistent, reliable voice that merely has the function of a transparent mediator. The main purpose of the objective poet who is the author of the poem is to draw a realistic portrait of the character of the narrator as he tells Sordello's story, so that the reader can engage in a critical second order observation of the workings of the consciousness of this fictional version of Browning. This includes the proto-modernist depiction of the fragmentation of the

narrator's perception and consciousness. Columbus and Kemper come up with such a negative evaluation of the narrator because they make mistakes in their emphasis. Although they imply that the author deliberately designs a flawed speaker, they give a lot more space to the narrator's weaknesses than to the author's successful objective poetry which exposes these deficiencies.

I suspect that Columbus and Kemper also come to their conclusion because they underestimate one more dimension which adds to the complexity of the narrator's self: his development throughout the poem, which is, of course, more significant than the personal development which a real person would undergo in the course of the narration within a realistic time-frame. The following section will explore how the poem manages to portray this transitional stage which leads from subjective towards objective poetics and which is the crucial phase in Browning's development.

V.1.3. The Observation of the Narrator's Self in Process

The narrator's development can be traced on both levels of the text. In the enounced, it appears in the three key passages on poetics: Book I, 462-566 only discusses the negative aspects of objective (and subjective) poetry; Book III, 840-89 opts for objective poetry, but modestly admits that it cannot be achieved during the poet's earthly existence; and if we read the famous 'Why, he writes *Sordello!*' (V, 620, 1888 version) as the narrator's self-reference, this is finally his assertion that he can create objective poetry.

In the enunciation, we can note changes in the narrator's technique of presenting the story. Throughout the first half of the poem, he lives up to his promise from the opening passage of providing a guiding authorial voice for the audience, and his many interventions display a concern with his own identity which bears witness to his commitment to subjective poetry. The second half of the text offers a more straightforward narrative and contains a higher proportion of direct speeches by characters, which foreshadow Browning's later use of the dramatic monologue. This self-effacement signals that the narrator has solved the dilemma of his self-definition and now tries to put his new objective ideal, which he discovered in Venice in Book III,

into practice. There are still some intrusions which show that he has not reached his ideal yet, but they are fewer and have a clearer function in the logic of the narrative.

There is a general agreement among critics that the poem's progression towards a more straightforward narrative reflects a development from subjective to more objective poetics. These changes are usually taken to document not the narrator's but the author's development, a logical consequence of the long period of composition of the text.¹⁰ The most concrete hypothesis in this line is DeVane's elaboration of Griffin and Minchin (Chapter 6), which postulates the existence of four different draft versions (*Handbook* 72-85): the first one, a Shelleyan introspective psychological study, was made redundant by the intervening composition of *Paracelsus*; the second one, a romance about war and love, was pre-empted by the publication of Mrs Busk's *Sordello* in 1837; the conception of the third, historical version was revised after Browning's conversion experience in Venice; the fourth version adds *Sordello*'s devotion to humanity, makes him the son of Taurello and turns Taurello into the central character of the latter part. DeVane argues that in the published text the first three versions are preserved in the progression from *Sordello*'s solipsistic youth in Goito, via *Sordello* as troubadour and lover in Mantua, to the political idealist in Ferrara (*Handbook* 84).

This neat but highly speculative theory cannot be backed up by any evidence, since no manuscripts survive which could document the stages of the textual genesis. DeVane builds his argument on the development of *Sordello* in the published text and on some of Browning's references to the work in the paratext, whose reliability Woolford and Karlin call into question in their discussion of DeVane's hypothesis (*Poems* 1: 352). Due to its internal inconsistencies, it is easy to refute DeVane's theory of the developing author. It is generally true that the heavy use of romance and fairy tale *motifs* in the first part – such as the love plot based on love at first sight, the foundling *motif*, the princess Palma and the witch and wicked stepmother Adelaide – recedes in favour of the political theme in the second half. The narrator finally even refuses to confront the issue of the unresolved love plot, when he remarks: 'Never ask /

¹⁰ According to a letter of 5-7 December 1834 (*Corr.* 3: 109), Browning had started composition in the summer of that year at the latest. Proofreading was probably finished on 23 February 1840 (Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 1:352).

Of Palma more!' (V, 973-4) However, some elements which DeVane attributes to the fourth version disrupt his pattern. The invention of the father – son relation is a clear return to the fairy tale, which, according to DeVane, was discarded with the first version. Conversely, the political framework does not emerge towards the end of the poem but is established at the very beginning, when the romance tableau of the Veronese crowd, which would conventionally be used to evoke an atmosphere of excitement, is soon superseded by rational, discursive political analysis. As Woolford and Karlin point out, the reference to the different historical settings of *Strafford* and *Sordello* in the 1837 preface to the former is another sign that the historical background had always been of great importance in the conception of the poem, which constructs the Guef – Ghibelline conflict as an analogy for the political situation in both nineteenth-century Italy and Britain (*Poems* 1: 352 and 376).

Of course, my alternative theory cannot rely on manuscript evidence either, but I think that the textual evidence is convincing enough to suggest that the development sketched out above is only that of the narrator. I believe that the progression is deliberately planned by the author, whose objective poetic identity remains stable throughout the text, whereas the narrator continually develops. Even at the end of the text the narrator does not quite attain the author's objectivity, so that the relationship between author and narrator parallels on a higher level the distance between the narrator and *Sordello*. Browning's development can thus be observed in two different dimensions in addition to *Sordello*'s story: through the dynamic development of the narrator throughout the text and through the ongoing contrast between the narrator's consciousness in the enounced and the author's superior consciousness in the enunciation. The next section, which focuses on the opening of the poem, will show that, although the narrator appears as a subjective poet and seems to utter an undemanding popular narrative, the author is already at this point an objective poet, who presents his main character, the narrator, dramatically in a way which incites the reader to a critical observation.

Before considering how the enunciation from the very start demands that the reader take an active part in the construction of meaning, I want to cite one isolated example in which we can see both the narrator's development and the juxtaposition of the narrator and the author's higher consciousness. While discussing *Sordello*'s

subjective poetic genius in a digression, the narrator suddenly interrupts himself: 'So that Sordello... Fool, who spied the mark / Of leprosy upon him' (I, 567-8). This can be read on two levels: firstly, it is the narrator's self-observation concerning the evaluation of his hero, in which he acknowledges that he should not make a special effort to look for latent corruption in Sordello's poetic nature; secondly, it is an observation of his process of narration. He realises that he is about to give away the story's ending and that a premature revelation of the conclusion acts like a contagious disease which spoils the narrative. In this way the narrator learns something about himself through an immediate retrospective self-observation, and thus undergoes a development. However, he emphasises his point by committing a further infringement on narrative stringency, a digression which is an altered version of the Romans' sack and pillage of Seleucia, reported by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (I, 583-603, Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 1: 435). It is a sort of Pandora's box story, in which hope for treasure makes the conquering soldiers open a hole in a temple, from which pestilence issues. Citing the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, which describes Ammianus as 'fond of showing his learning in digressions', Woolford and Karlin suggest 'that Browning may be parodying his manner here' (*Poems* 1: 435). I would go one step further and see this as Browning's self-parody. The narrator shows no awareness that after having noticed his flaw of unguarded loquaciousness in the enounced, he immediately repeats that flaw in his reflection on it. But through an observation of this repetition in the enunciation, a discerning reader can see the author's simultaneous higher consciousness.

V.1.4. The Narrator's Self-Definition in Relation to the Audience and the Creation of the Active Reader

The implications of the opening line, 'Who will, may hear Sordello's story told', which resonates throughout the poem, have not been fully exhausted yet. The line is a description of *Sordello* in a nutshell: it declares the focus of the text to be the mediation of a story through the narrator's consciousness ('Sordello's story told'); this is presented in a dramatic situation of utterance, allowing us to 'hear' the speaker; and it stresses that the technique of the poem is 'Maker-see' poetics, which work through the reader's participation in creating the utterance through an act of will ('Who will, may')

– as Armstrong remarks, the poem’s ‘word for the imagination’ (*Language* 141). The line indicates therefore that, in addition to Browning’s self-observation, the main purpose of the poem is to create this active reader who revises his passive habits of reception. In reading the poem, the reader is meant to undergo an educative process which parallels that of Sordello and the narrator. The final line of the poem, ‘Who would has heard Sordello’s story told’, completes the story of his development. The past tense ‘would’ emphasises that only a reader who was willing to engage with the text will have undergone this experience.

In this section, I will concentrate on how the enunciation, especially at the beginning of the poem, endeavours to challenge the reader into active participation and a critical observation of the narrator. Yet the re-education of the reader happens throughout the text and, to a lesser extent, also in the enounced. For instance, an abundance of imperatives and parenthetical asides (cf. Gibson *History* 101), even at the early stages when the narrator still pretends to play the role of a guide to a passive audience, compels us into activity, although the imperatives are strictly speaking not addressed to the reader but to the narrator’s fictional audience within the text. The imperatives of motion and perception in the descriptive passages in Verona (I, 309-45) give the reader the impression that he is physically present and able to influence events through his action:

Glide we by clapping doors [...] (I, 313)

Your finger – thus – you push
A spring, and the wall opens, would you rush
Upon the banqueters, select your prey [...] (I, 319-21)

[...](look you) [...] (I, 340)

The same technique is used for Goito castle (I, 374-442) and Taurello’s palace (IV,111-71). Other imperatives incite the reader to imaginative activity, for instance when the audience is asked to create Sordello’s physiognomy and soul: ‘[...] his face / – Look, now he turns away! Yourselves shall trace [...]’ (I, 461-2).

The authorial intention to get the reader involved is clearly stated in Browning’s paratextual discussion of his original style and subsequent revisions in a letter of 4 February 1856 to his American publisher James T. Fields:

As for 'Sordello' – I shall make it as easy as its nature admits, I believe – changing nothing and simply *writing in the unwritten every-other-line* which I stupidly left as an amusement for the reader to do – who, after all, is no writer, nor needs be. (Jack 'Browning on *Sordello*' 196)

Textual analyses of the poem's elliptical syntax and stylistic complexities like Armstrong's 'Browning and the "Grotesque Style"' or Tucker's *Browning's Beginnings* have demonstrated how the reader is obliged to fill these ambiguous gaps. His re-enactment of the poet's constitution of meaning makes the reader aware of his own process of perception, thus inviting him to engage in a self-observation which parallels the poet's self-observation of his creativity.¹¹ The deliberate creation of gaps of course anticipates modernist techniques, especially T. S. Eliot's excisions in *The Waste Land* under Ezra Pound's influence. Froula even calls *Sordello* the "missing link" between Romantic humanism and modernist poetics' (966). And in his exposition of his method in the letter, Browning comes close to the concepts of reception theory. But Latané, who analyses *Sordello* using Wolfgang Iser's paradigms, reminds us that intentional obscurity was not that unusual for the 1830s. He sketches out two clashing conceptions of the long poem of the period: on the one hand, undemanding entertainment, and on the other, what he calls elitist 'aesthetics of difficulty' for a select few ('*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 15-26). Browning already formulates these demanding poetics in his call for the reader's 'co-operating fancy' in the preface to *Paracelsus*.

In the letter to Fields, it sounds as though by 1856 Browning had abandoned these 'aesthetics of difficulty'. If he seriously thought that his original ellipses had been 'stupid', this would imply a radical revision of his poetics. The poem's dedication, which was first added in the 1863 edition, does not go so far as to condemn the entire original scheme. It merely bears witness to Browning's disillusioned acknowledgement that he had asked too much even of the most motivated readers:

I wrote it [*Sordello*] twenty-five years ago for only a few, counting even in these on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since; for

¹¹ The reader's participation in the act of creation may ultimately also encourage him to a critical observation of his aesthetic criteria. A device which makes the reader, and even more so the reader who is a critic, engages in such a self-observation at several places throughout the poem is the hetero-observation of the changeable hanger-on of troubadours, Naddo. The reader's indirect self-observation through Naddo corresponds to Browning's self-observation through the character of *Sordello*.

I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might, – instead of what the few must, – like: but after all, I imagined another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it.

In contrast, Browning's letter in defence of *Men and Women* to Ruskin, written on 10 December 1855, three months before that to Fields, suggests that even his new compositions still follow the original poetics of *Sordello*:

I cannot begin writing poetry till my imaginary reader has conceded licences to me which you demur at altogether. 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 ['Popularity'] as if it were Hobbs' or Nobbs' lease of his house, or testament of his devisings, wherein, I grant you, not a 'then and there,' 'to him and his heirs,' 'to have and to hold,' and so on, would be superfluous [...] (Collingwood 200)

The difference between these statements by the mature author is not surprising in view of the fact that the last one reacts to a critic who stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the author's right to poetic license and his call for an imaginative reader, whereas the other two are intended for a publisher who wants to sell a marketable, accessible book and for readers who must understand the demands placed on them by the text but must not be put off by insurmountable obscurity. Other remarks, such as that to Moncure D. Conway, betray a similar conflict between Browning's willingness to make concessions to the audience and his desire to remain true to his original project: '*Sordello* is corrected *throughout*; not altered at all, but really elucidated, I hope, by a host of little attentions to the reader [...]' (17 September 1863, DeVane and Knickerbocker 157).

Most of the revisions as they finally appear in the 1863 edition – the eighty-five new lines, the changes in punctuation and the addition of quotation marks – do clarify the text. Only the addition of running titles at the top of each page, which are yet another level of self-observation, does not turn out to be a great help in following the storyline, considering that they are on a textual level above that of the narrator and should thus express the author's superior overview of the plot. The voice of the running-titles is not as clearly a distinctive *persona* as the learned gloss writer in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', but it does not really give the reader the

unambiguous authorial guidance he would expect, either. The running-titles must have either originated in the earnest desire to elucidate the text, after which Browning got carried away by his continuing commitment to his original demanding poetics; or they were from the start planned as an ironic device, as another voice which merely pretends to have authorial authority and lures us into the erroneous belief that the poem is an accessible narrative for passive readers.

It is tempting to embrace the latter explanation, since this would reduplicate the strategy at the beginning of *Sordello*, which soon disappoints the reader's expectation that the poem is an undemanding romance. The poem opens with the narrator's discussion of his choice of genre for his utterance. As far as the author is concerned, the narrative form mediated through the narrator's voice is of course necessary in order to let the reader perceive the effect which his observation of the plot and characters have on his consciousness. On the level of the enounced, the narrator proclaims he would have preferred a dramatic presentation without authorial intervention, thus displaying his agreement with the preference for drama over epic in Book V:

Never, I should warn you first,
Of my own choice had this, if not the worst
Yet not the best expedient, served to tell
A story I could body forth so well
By making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him:
[...]
I should delight in watching first to last
His [*Sordello's*] progress as you watch it, not a whit
More in the secret than yourselves who sit
Fresh-chapleted to listen [...] (I, 11-17 and 22-5)

He argues that the novelty of his subject requires the narrative genre and a guiding authorial voice which explicates the characters and events for the audience:

[...] but it seems
Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing them
Had best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
The wearer's quality, or take his stand
Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand
Beside them; so for once I face ye, friends,
Summoned together from the world's four ends,
Dropped down from Heaven or cast up from Hell,
To hear the story I propose to tell. (I, 25-34)

When it finally gets under way, the narrative seems to satisfy fully the audience's expectations. The colourful tableau of the crowd in Verona promises a typical historical romance *à la* Walter Scott with its war action and love plot, the genre also adopted by Mrs Busk's *Sordello*. Nevertheless, it becomes increasingly clear throughout Book I that the generic conventions are not fulfilled. The narrator indulges the public's taste for authorial guidance so much that it becomes frustrated. His too ostentatious and lengthy interventions slow down a genre which depends on rapid movement. Donald Hair remarks that whereas narrators of historical romance would usually comment on the historical setting and external action, Browning's narrator only uses the thirteenth-century setting in *Sordello* as a backdrop and prefers to reflect on internal development (*Genre* 28). Browning's authorial intention not to write historical romance is expressed in the 1863 dedication:

The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so – you, with many known and unknown to me, think so – others may one day think so [...]

It seems to me that the significant difference between Browning's treatment of the historical setting and the characters' psyche in *Sordello* in comparison to the conventional romance does not lie in their quantity but in their quality. Browning's disingenuously vague 'no more importance than a background requires' suggests that, as mentioned in the previous section, the historical setting does play a role, and that its function is not limited to the delight in external action in the romance. As far as character portrayal is concerned, Hair cites some examples of contemporary reviews recommending a more detailed description of the passions in romances (*Genre* 28). On the surface, *Sordello* seems to respond to such requests by giving ample space to the workings of the hero's psyche, but in their complexity they clearly go beyond what one would expect in a romance.

In their note to the poem's first line, Woolford and Karlin cite the opening of a representative verse romance, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, which uses the phrase 'I wol tell', to prove that Browning's first line, which also contains the word 'told', defines *Sordello* as a romance (*Poems* 1: 395). However, there is a crucial difference between *Sordello* and such a text due to Browning's addition of the critical observation of the genre of the romance. This dimension is also present in Chaucer's *in propria persona*

rendition of the ‘Tale of Sir Thopas’, which Woolford and Karlin quote as their second example of an ‘I wol tell[e]’ opening. The speaker Chaucer first responds to the host’s demand for a story with a typical verse romance, but after the host’s interrupting complaint switches to the moral ‘Tale of Melibee’ in prose. The precedent of Chaucer’s change of genre in his *in propria persona* narrative suggests that the conventional romance opening in Browning’s text is also no guarantee that the following text will obey the generic rules, especially because the narrator clearly states at the outset that he acts against his own values in choosing the genre which is later on in the poem labelled as the lowest in the generic hierarchy.

The deviation from conventional romance does not come as a surprise to an active reader, who can already pick up in the precise wording of the opening, its syntax and imagery, a host of hints at the level of the enunciation as to the true nature of the poem. A close look at lines 2-4 reveals a difference from the romance pattern:

His story? Who believes me shall behold
The man, pursue his fortunes to the end
Like me [...]

The three elements which the enjambement places in the prominent position at the beginning of a line state the main object of the text: it is not ‘His story’, i.e. external plot as in the romance, but ‘The man’, i.e. character; and there is a hint at the importance of the narrator as observer (‘me’), on whom the phrase ends.

The analogies which the narrator uses for himself in the opening are a further indication that the promise of an accessible narrative in the enounced must not be taken at face value. The first and most extended one is the simile in lines 4-10 about an episode in *Don Quixote*, in which the knight mistakes the clouds of dust raised by two flocks of sheep for those raised by the armies of Pentapolin and his adversary advancing to battle (*Don Quixote* Part I, Chapter 18). The point of comparison with *Sordello* which immediately comes to mind is Cervantes’ intervening narrator, who ironically comments on his hero, a device which makes the novel one of Schlegel’s models of Romantic Irony *avant la lettre* (‘Athenäum’ frag. 154). But instead, the parallel is drawn between the *narrator* of *Sordello* and Cervantes’ *hero*. In the enounced, the simile illustrates the narrator’s awareness that his perception of his historical subject is obstructed. It is difficult to grasp the medieval ‘Sordello, compassed murkily about /

With ravage of six long sad hundred years' (I, 8-9) through the 'din / And dust' (I, 5-6) of temporal distance. This and the anxious reference to the book-worms in chronicles as agents of time's destructiveness (I, 189-92) are early instances of Browning's evolving fascination with the inaccessibility of historical truth, which becomes so central in *R&B*. Mark Hawthorne sees the allusion here as an appeal to the reader to participate in the constitution of meaning because 'Sordello, like Pentapolin, is a combination of a few facts and much fantasy' (1036) and Browning's historical inaccuracies incite the reader to make an 'imaginative leap' (1037).

There is a lot more implied in the enunciation, though. The passage alluded to is literally about observation, i.e. Don Quixote's mistaken perception of the flocks of sheep. It thus once more confirms that observation, and more precisely that undertaken by the narrator, with whom the Don is compared, is a main issue in *Sordello*. Hawthorne rightly insists that in associating the narrator of *Sordello* with the hero, and not the narrator, of *Don Quixote*, Browning the author distances himself from his narrator (1034). The passage is framed by the narrator's eager appeals to be believed, 'Who believes me shall behold' (I, 2) and 'Only believe me. Ye believe?' (I, 9). He has reason to be worried, since the parallel with Don Quixote's ridiculous misprision of reality, which is caused by a too vivid imagination, implies that the narrator's perception of the story may be a similar misprision influenced by his subjective point of view. Armstrong interprets this passage as a display of 'the fallacies of Romantic accounts of creation' (*Language* 145). This would make it another exorcising observation of the remnants of Romantic values in Browning's younger self. Moreover, Don Quixote may not be a writer, but he is an author of sorts in that he constantly generates chivalric romance plots. The analogy with this belated imitator of a tradition which is outdated in his day anticipates the failure of the narrator's presentation of Sordello's story in romance terms even before he has stated his intention of choosing that form.

Another resemblance between the narrator, Don Quixote and also Sordello lies in their idealistic humanitarianism as the driving force behind their creativity. Of course, the failure of this principle is most prominent in Sordello's unrealised dreams to recreate the Roman republic and to defend the cause of the people. Sordello, with his Sancho-like follower Naddo, is a more clearly Quixotic figure than the narrator. But the

narrator also devotes himself to 'suffering humanity' in Book III and turns out to be not quite able to implement his theory of humanitarian, objective poetry. Through the intertextual reference to the weird idealist Don Quixote, who always fails, the enunciation implies that this ideal is either an illusion or that its purpose is foiled by its impracticability. The enunciation thus appears to call into question the whole humanitarian project which is developed in the Venice digression. Yet if there is a parallel between Cervantes' hero and Browning's narrator, this suggests that there is also a parallel on a higher level between Cervantes' authorial narrator, who advocates the value of humanitarianism despite Don Quixote's absurdity, and the author of *Sordello*, who manages to write a objective, humanitarian poem. Still, in situating the difficulty of fulfilling the humanitarian ideal on the level of his narrator in addition to that of the character Sordello, Browning emphasises more than Cervantes how precarious it is.

The other self-images put forward in the opening follow the same principle as the *Don Quixote* reference: statements in the enounced are subverted through intertextual allusions in the enunciation. These are indications for the reader that he must not trust the narrator and take the stance of a critical second order observer of his narration. In the enounced, the comparisons to a tailor writing with chalk on the characters' clothes (I, 28-9) and the motley-wearer with his pointing-pole (I, 30) state that the narrator will provide his audience with the reliable guidance they need, while also conveying his condescension towards the role which he feels obliged to adopt. But a look at the intertextual references shows the assistance offered by these two characters to be a mere appearance. The tailor in conjunction with the clothes imagery later used in III, 685-97 pays homage to the prime representative of Romantic Irony in English prose, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, with its self-conscious narration and an editor-narrator who struggles to give a coherent picture of Teufelsdröckh's opinions and story. And the parti-coloured costume seems to refer to the harlequin of the *commedia dell'arte*, whom Schlegel cites as a model of Romantic Irony when he defines his notion of *transcendental buffoonery* ('Lyceum' frag. 42). He is the character in the play who is in control of the plot and yet undermines his own authority.

Daniel Stempel has identified the figure with the pointing-pole as the presenter of the popular *trompe-l'œil* spectacle of the diorama, which combined the 'illusion of

immediate experience' with 'a running commentary of amplification, interpretation, and amusing quips' (555-6). On the face of it, Stempel's comparison of the narrative mediation in *Sordello* with the methods of projecting pictures of scenery in the diorama seems quite convincing, but he only supports this interpretation with quotations from Dickens from the 1850s and 1860s and another reference by Henry Morley to the wand of the 'exhibitor of a diorama' from 1856 (555). Stempel has been challenged by Latané, who insists there is no evidence of 'garrulous lecturers with pointing poles' in 1820s and 1830s sources on dioramas and cites researchers' assumptions that the lecturer only appeared in 1848 ('Diorama' 25-7). To this can be added that none of the accounts Stempel cites indicate that the presenters' comments were self-referential in the way the Romantic Irony in *Sordello* is. Moreover, the diorama, which does not present a story with characters and dramatically motivated changes of scene, can hardly be a model for the progression of the plot and the speculation about characters' motivations in *Sordello*.

I wish to argue an alternative inspiration for the pointing-pole holder that is suggested by the reference to *Don Quixote* in lines 4-10 and the narrator's self-description as puppeteer a little further into the poem, which is only separated from the 'pointing-pole' by a digressive look at the audience: 'What heart / Have I to play my puppets, bear my part / Before these worthies?' (I, 71-3). *Don Quixote* Part II, Book II, Chapters 8 and 9 relates the knight's adventure at the puppet show, another episode in which the Don's observation of the world is coloured by his biased perception, which sees everything in romance patterns. The puppeteer's show is described thus:

[...] and on the outside [of the puppet player's booth] sat a boy, who was his servant, to interpret and explain the mysteries of the shew, holding a wand, with which he pointed out the puppets as they entered. (3: 226)¹²

Then follows the boy's long monologue accompanying the show, which includes many elements that are also present in *Sordello*: the claim to recount 'true history [...] literally extracted from the French chronicles and Spanish ballads' (3: 227), which corresponds to the reference to chronicles by Browning's narrator at the beginning and

¹² Quotations are from the 1770 edition of Tobias Smollett's translation, which is listed as the only English copy of *Don Quixote* in the Brownings' library (Kelley and Coley 53). It was given to Pen Browning in 1863 by Landor, but Browning might have read this very common translation in the 1830s.

end of his narrative (I, 189 and VI, 818); direct speech by characters; explanatory flashbacks; comments on motivations and character traits comparable to the narrator's many analyses of Sordello (e.g. V, 322ff., VI, 588ff.). The narrator's idea of chalking 'The wearer's quality' on the garments can thus be seen as a metaphor for the device of authoritative description of characters used by the boy. Finally, the boy's regular appeals to the audience, e.g. 'Behold, gentlemen', 'Gentlemen, turn your eyes to the tower that appears yonder', 'Observe', 'don't you see' etc. (3: 227ff.) resemble the apostrophes to the fictional audience within *Sordello* noted at the beginning of this section. As in *Sordello*, the reader and the audience in the text see the action through the speech of this expounder.

The boy turns out to be exceedingly verbose and is repeatedly admonished for his digressions and verbal flourishes, a fault of which Browning's narrator is also guilty. Ironically, it is Don Quixote, the lover of digressive romance novels, who first complains. He interrupts a second time to object to the anachronism of bells ringing in Moorish Saragossa, thereby displaying his awareness that he is only watching an artistic representation of events. But he is soon so captivated by the story that he forgets it is fiction, confuses the hierarchy of narrative levels, draws his sword and 'kills' the Moorish puppets in defence of the thwarted Christian lovers. The change in perception that Don Quixote undergoes in this episode is comparable to the overall development of the reading experience of *Sordello*: the gradual alterations in the narrative mediation create a progression towards a decreasing awareness of authorial intrusion and increasing dramatic illusion in the later books.

In view of the multiple parallels between the cited episodes of *Don Quixote* and *Sordello*, I would argue that the 'pointing-pole' takes its source in Cervantes' novel rather than in the diorama. The direct reference to *Don Quixote* in I, 4-10, with its many intertextual analogies, is already an effective method of sketching out the purpose and problems of Browning's text within a few lines. The further reference to the narrator as puppeteer with 'pointing-pole in hand' confirms Browning's indebtedness to Cervantes' ideas about perception and subjectivity, reminding the reader that he is engaged in a 'Quixotic attempt' (running titles to Book I) to convey Sordello's story despite its temporal, geographical and cultural remoteness.

We come back to the perennial double bind in Browning's attitude towards his readership: all these implications in the enunciation can only be noticed by an active reader, but Browning knows very well that the highly perceptive readership which his poetics require still needs to be formed. He confronts this problem by making *Sordello* an ironic wish-fulfilment: the narrator creates his fictional audience within the text, as a hint at what the author would like to be able to do with his real readers. The narrator's chosen audience comes very close to the select circle of co-operating readers 'with care for a man or book' described in the dedication. One part of the audience consists of friends, his 'elect, / Chiefly for love' (I, 55-6). Two of them, Euphrasia Fanny Haworth and Walter Savage Landor, are addressed directly in III, 924-59. Both represent ideal readers in that they combine personal sympathy with an imaginative response to Browning's poetry. Haworth, who read his juvenilia, belongs to his earliest encouraging private audience. As Latané mentions, she responded to *Paracelsus* with five pen and ink sketches and her two sonnets 'To the Author of "Paracelsus"' ('*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 53).¹³ Amédée de Ripert-Monclar's commentary on *Paracelsus*, Joseph Arnould's verse epistle on *Dramatic Lyrics*, as well as Domett's marginalia and his poem in defence of *Pippa Passes* noted by Maynard (110) and Latané ('*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 53-4) suggest that Haworth is a representative of a small coterie of appreciating friends which really existed and which Browning might have had in mind when referring to his 'real set of good hearty praisers' (11 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 71). Landor was one of the famous literary figures present at the supper party celebrating the first night of Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Ion* in 1836, during which Talfourd reputedly honoured Browning with a toast (*Corr.* 3: 324). In the same year, Landor included a note on *Paracelsus* in his 'Satire on Satirists', one of the first public tributes to Browning. In *Sordello*, Landor thus represents the recognition of Browning's genius in literary circles. Landor is both peer and predecessor: his *Imaginary Conversations* are a stylistic model for Browning's dramatic method; and in belonging, as far as his age and themes are concerned, to the Romantic generation, he also represents an acknowledgement of Browning as heir to the literary tradition.

¹³ The sketches are reproduced after page 250 in *Corr.* Vol. 3. The sonnets were published in the *New Monthly Magazine* 48 (1836), p. 48.

This claim to being part of the tradition is made explicitly in the enounced when the narrator refers to the other part of his audience, the deceased poets who return to earth to 'see how their successors fare' (I, 48). The enunciation confirms his ambition through epic echoes. The portrayal of the dead poets as a ghostly audience crowding around the living narrator recalls the journeys to the underworld in the *Odyssey* (XI), the *Aeneid* (VI) and the *Divina Commedia* (Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 1: 397). However, the narrator here does not have to descend to the underworld but has the power to summon the dead. The humorously pitying description of the dead poets 'Striving to look as lively as [they] can' (I, 50) suggests a feeling of ascendancy of the living poet over the tradition which cannot fully come to life again.

In contrast, the much discussed ousting of Shelley's ghost is justified in the enounced by the explanation that his 'pure face' would intimidate the narrator (I, 59-71). The narrator cannot equal Shelley's perfection, which itself surpasses the standard of Aeschylus and Sidney, poets whom Shelley admired. But the apparent dismissal of his model is partially counteracted by a hidden imitation. Latané reminds us that the context in which Shelley is rejected, the idea that a poet's audience should be constituted by his peers, echoes the 'Defence of Poetry' ('*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 48). The 'Defence' was not published until 1840, but Browning might have read it before publication.¹⁴ The question whether Browning consciously followed the 'Defence' is actually not that relevant since he could have encountered the concept of a small elitist audience – though not specifically limited to poets – in Shelley's published prefaces to *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion*.

The dilemma of finding the right balance between situating himself in the tradition and transcending it which Browning encounters is apparent in a passage which is explicitly about the difficulty of disentwining the merits of the precursor *Sordello* from those of his more famous successor Dante (I, 346-73). Yet it is implicitly also about Browning's relation to the 'Florentine' and the literary tradition. In the enounced, the framing of the passage with the exclamation 'If I should falter now' (I, 347 and 373) displays the narrator's fear of not being up to his task. He presents

¹⁴ Latané proposes Browning's publisher Moxon, who also dealt with Mary Shelley, as a mediator ('*Sordello* and Aesthetics' 137-8, n. 18). Woolford and Karlin suggest the friendship with Leigh Hunt as another possible source (*Poems* 1: 371).

himself less as a creative artist than as a mere literary historian who is trying to give a balanced account of literary influences and is wary to 'approach the august sphere' (I, 360) of poetic genius. But paradoxically, this statement of inferiority to Dante includes a vivid recreation of Dante's journey in the *Divina Commedia*, it is couched in a startlingly visionary imagery which draws on 'John's transcendent vision' in the *Book of Revelation* (I, 364-6), and Browning's lines 368 and 371 echo *Paradise Lost* I, 68-9 and III, 353-61. The enunciation thus suggests that Browning can very well compete with the most prestigious, visionary predecessors.

The vision of the narrator's spiralling ascent in the 'golden courts' (VI, 793-814), reminiscent of the geography of the *Paradiso*, seems to confirm the implicit aspiration to be the successor to Dante. The bracketed reflection on the three confidences made to Dante's character Palma (V, 970-6) is a further acknowledgement of Browning's indebtedness. But there are also hints in this reference that Browning is surpassing his predecessor, who is four hundred lines earlier alluded to as the type of the first, and least sophisticated, age in the development of poetry (V, 563-81): the narrator's comment on the romance-like accumulation of coincidences around Palma betrays a retrospective critical observation of his use of such a crude device; he professes his lack of interest in Palma as 'passion's votaress', a typified character as she would appear in the *Divina Commedia*; and Browning's fusing of Palma and Cunizza into one character goes beyond a mere imitation of Dante.

It seems that at these points the author does not distance himself from the narrator's ambition to transcend the tradition but extends the claim to himself, because the intertextual echoes in the enunciation confirm the enounced. However, distance is re-established often enough, most prominently when, after implicitly likening himself to Moses, the narrator is scolded as 'Presumptuous!' (III, 807) in the audience's only direct speech. Through this inclusion of a critical voice, the author exposes the narrator's efforts to place himself in the tradition – although the emphasis is immediately shifted to a criticism of the audience's categories of observation (see Chapter V.1.5).

The author's distance from his narrator is also discernible on a closer inspection of the narrator's effect on his fictional audience. Personal friends and poets constitute an exceptionally sympathetic, sensitive group. They can therefore be expected to make

a disproportionately big effort at understanding compared to what can reasonably be exacted from an ordinary, interested real reader. Yet surprisingly, even this choice audience cannot realise the poetic ideal of allusive ‘brother’s speech’ and at the beginning demands a guiding explicator. And as already mentioned (Chapter V.1.2), the narrator’s undertaking is further undermined through the dramatic irony inherent in his ‘fear ye [the audience] sleep’ (I, 58), which turns out to be justified at the end of the poem (VI, 870).¹⁵ The fact that the narrator fails limits the probability that the author, who does not have the supernatural power to pick an ideal audience, might succeed. The author’s anticipation of the poem’s contemporary bad reception and its failure to create his active reader is thus inscribed in the text itself, despite Browning’s later paratextual comments in the dedication and correspondence (quoted above) that he expected to have a small audience. However, this disappointment is held in balance by the civet metaphor in the closing lines. As in the wine metaphor which Browning later uses in the ‘Epilogue’ to *Pacchiarotto* (see Chapter IV.4), the appreciation of civet, i.e. the poem, depends on a temporal distance. Its pungent stench will be diffused into the ‘after-gust’ (VI, 881) of a pleasant perfume. The recommendation of the unappealing musk-pod in place of a rose is still so ironic that the narrator calls it ‘overbold’ (VI, 881) and keeps the question of the likelihood of the poem’s success open. We will see in the next section that the impossibility of successfully creating perfect poetry in co-operation with a responsive readership is already suggested in the passage which first formulates Browning’s new poetics.

V.1.5. An Autobiographical Episode: The Venice Digression

The poem’s most dramatic way of presenting the process of Browning’s development is the autobiographical conversion scene in the Venice digression in Book III. This is of course a highly conventional device, but Browning’s variation on the theme implies a critical observation of the established pattern of autobiographical narrative. Paul Jay in his study *Being in the Text. Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*

¹⁵ A parallel case of a speaker who creates his imaginary, silent listener is *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*. The end of this poem, which reveals the utterance to be a soliloquy without a listener, shows that the prince’s impressive creation of an audience through his willpower is nevertheless an illusion.

traces an evolution leading from Wordsworth, with his need to overcome the feeling of self-division and his nostalgic desire to return to his origins and to recover an idealised homogeneous past self, towards writers like Paul Valéry and Roland Barthes, who accept and enjoy the diversity of the divided subject. On Jay's scale, *Sordello* would occupy a middle ground between these two extremes. The narrator constructs a coherent biography of Sordello, Browning's youngest *alter ego* in the text, and tries to make sense of it. But Sordello's abortive *Bildungsroman* shows that the aim of harmonious self-fulfilment is out of reach: he experiences an epiphany in his vision of his mission for the people, but cannot act on it; he seems to enact the desire for original unity through his two cyclical returns to Goito, but these returns are tokens of his failure and the fragmentation of his self, most clearly when his corpse is buried in the caryatid fount.

For Sordello, Browning's Romantic self, fragmentation is fatal, but for the narrator it is so no longer. He does not even attempt to construct his own comprehensive biography. Instead, the reader has to piece his character together from self-referential remarks in his interventions. And whereas we see Sordello also in the role of lover and would-be politician, the narrator isolates only the episode which is immediately relevant for the composition of the text which records it, limiting self-representation strictly to his artistic self: a fragment of the self presented in a fragment of his autobiographical plot. Nevertheless, as in *Sartor Resartus*, which represents the same state of development in literary self-presentation and advocates the same reorientation from egotism to humanitarian altruism, the conversion episode stands out through its situation exactly in the middle of the text and its vivid detail. This economic solution dispenses with the cumbersome grand narrative of the self, since the crucial turning point of the conversion encompasses the whole biography through looking backwards and forwards.

The moral-aesthetic content of the conversion experience in *Sordello* is not essentially different from that in *The Prelude*. Both poems pivot on the discovery of the poet's love of mankind, but the radical difference lies in the influence this realisation has on their poetry. Wordsworth largely continues to write introspective poetry, whereas after *Sordello* Browning turns from self-observation to the observation of mankind through drama and the dramatic monologue. Of course, *Sordello* itself still

draws on the self-observing autobiographical plot. Yet in writing the key episode of his own *Künstlerroman*, Browning overcomes the poetry of self-mirroring because the formal presentation of the conversion scene is already informed by his new objective poetics.¹⁶

Several devices in the enunciation which distance or postpone self-revelation indicate that the author already enacts his new poetics. Firstly, the retelling of the Venice scene after the narrative movement ending in III, 545 is approached in a very evasive manner which avoids direct self-reference: the narrator draws the first explicit comparison between Sordello and himself, but surprisingly, the analogy is not with Sordello's poetic but his political crisis. Sordello is at this point tempted to become a political tyrant who disregards the people, whereas the narrator reflects on his temptation to disregard his audience (III, 577ff.). Before the narrator refers to himself, the brief digression about Brennus' siege of Rome (III, 571-6) acts as a delay. Although only a simile for the sunrise in the enounced, in the enunciation the literal fall of Brennus' soldier from the parapet of the Capitol foreshadows Browning's and Sordello's fall from the height of their idealist-subjectivist dreams. Direct self-observation is further delayed by the inserted passage on the archimage as a former self (III, 577-91). Nine lines of direct self-reference follow, but in the pre-1868 versions Sordello then replaces the narrator as the speaker.

Secondly, the reflection in Venice, which leads up to the resolution to write objective poetry, is cast in the objective mould of a dramatic scene. It is a monologue spoken by the former self of the narrator to a silent interlocutor, 'suffering humanity'. The narrator's former self, too, is already a prolific producer of dramatic monologues in that he invents the utterances of three exemplary poets reciting their poetry and the audience's response to them (III, 843-89). The speech-punctuation in the 1863-65 editions puts these three examples in single quotation marks and opens double

¹⁶ Surprisingly, to establish a distance from his own self, Browning does not exploit the differentiation of two levels of consciousness inherent to any autobiography, i.e. the distinction of the retrospectively narrating self and the past narrated self. They are, on the contrary, hardly distinguishable. In addition to the blurring of the narrator and Sordello due to the omission of closing quotation marks after line 599 of the 1840 version (see section V.1.1), there is a fluid transition between the speech of the former self in Venice (alias Sordello) and the narrating self. The narrated self addresses 'suffering humanity' for the last time in line 755, and the addresses to the fictional audience within the text from line 853 onwards must be spoken from the point of view of the narrating self, but it is not clear at which point the change of voice occurs.

quotation marks at line 843, which are mistakenly never closed. This suggests that all three speeches are embedded in the direct speech of one of the ‘best poets’ who devises dramatic examples of himself and the other two types. Thus three monologue creators are at work – the author, the narrator in Venice and the ‘best poet’ –, generating a *mise en abîme* of dramatic utterances. The past self of the narrator moreover invents a hypothetical dramatic scene in which ‘suffering humanity’ approaches him and he plays the condescending alms-giver (III, 730-45). His obvious delight in this role-playing confirms his reorientation towards objectivity.

There is a third reminder that the entire poem is the narrator’s dramatic utterance in front of an audience, i.e. objective poetry: the voice attacking the narrator as ‘Presumptuous!’ (III, 807) after he has compared himself to Moses. As I have already argued in Chapter II.3, the analogy with Moses suits Browning to authorise his self-image as a self-sacrificing, unappreciated precursor poet. As in ‘One Word More’, however, the reference to the stereotype of the poet as prophet here calls up a number of other notions which are central to the Romantic self-conceptualisation, above all the idea that the poet has a defined ‘office’ (III, 809-10). The critical member of the audience who interrupts the narrator denounces such Romantic pretensions, and the narrator vehemently rejects this aspect of the analogy. In Chapters IV.3 and IV.4, we have already seen Browning responding to established metaphors and methods of self-conceptualisation and revising them in order to signal his difference from the Romantics. He does this throughout the digression. As in *Pacchiarotto* with its hints of an underlying similarity to the self-conceptualisation of the Romantic poets it criticises, there are some, though fewer, indications in this scene, in which Browning officially discards Romanticism, that the narrator has not left Romanticism fully behind.

The Venice digression can be read as a rewriting of several precursor texts which convey a certain idea of the poet and his vocation and from which Browning distances himself. If we can trust lines 942-5 and Browning’s letter to Fanny Haworth ([May 1840,] *Corr.* 4: 269), the scene recounts a genuine autobiographical episode during the real poet’s visit to the city in June 1838 before the composition of the second half of Book III. But the setting in Venice also has a literary predecessor. ‘I sung this on an empty palace-step / At Venice’ (III, 656) echoes the opening line of Canto IV of Byron’s *Childe Harold*, ‘I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs’, which

introduces the interruption of the narrative by the narrator's self-conscious reflections. At the outset Browning's narrator is just as self-centred as Byron's, but in the course of the episode he overcomes the Byronic pose through his conversion to humanitarianism. However, this superiority to Byron only applies if he is conceptualised exclusively as the poet of *Childe Harold*, which is the case in Browning's many other references to him as the stereotypically egotistical Romantic. But the whole Byron is actually a model for the narrator's conversion. Far from lacking unselfish humanitarianism, he was the only British Romantic poet to take the step from poetry to political activism, the ideal which neither Sordello nor Browning can attain. He became involved in the Greek struggle for liberty while writing *Don Juan*, a poem whose self-conscious, self-satirising narrator is a perceptible, though unacknowledged, influence on *Sordello*.

The confrontation with 'suffering humanity', which leads to the conversion, also rewrites Wordsworth's encounters with representatives of the poor, such as his meetings with the rural people described in Book XII of *The Prelude*, the discharged soldier (Book IV) or the urban beggars in London (Book VII).¹⁷ Wordsworth, who in the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* makes a point of defending his for the 1790s indecorous realism, often presents realistically depicted men to endow them with a symbolic meaning. In contrast, Browning demonstrates in his description of the Italian peasant girls that he can master Wordsworthian realism, which by the 1830s has become inoffensive, but then goes on to outdo Wordsworth with the more radical realism of his decrepit, 'care-bit', 'sad disheveled ghost' (III, 721 and 676). This is confirmed by his move from a metaphorical reference to clothes standing for happiness (III, 685-94) to the literal meaning of the tattered clothes which are not sufficient to cover the bodies of the poor.

At the same time, Browning transgresses blatantly against realism, since his startling description is that of an allegorical 'suffering humanity'. In his affectionately ironic address, the narrator promotes her to the even more artificial role of the muse, thus opening up the issue of the revaluation of (epic) inspiration. *Sordello*'s structural similarities to the epic and its modifications of that genre have been discussed by Ryals (*Becoming* 108) and at greater length by Grube, who calls it a 'Christian Epic'. The

¹⁷ All references are to the 1805 version. *The Prelude* was only published in 1850, but samples of this type of Wordsworthian scene were already available to Browning in the 1830s.

central position of the digression recalls in particular the Miltonic technique of authorial interventions and apostrophes to the muse at the beginning of Books I, III, VII and IX of *Paradise Lost*. In substituting the traditional epic goddess with the most repulsive aspect of humanity, Browning dismisses aesthetic concerns in favour of ethical motivations in his definition of the purpose of art. He also replaces the traditional superior – inferior relationship between the inspiring muse and the inspired poet by equality. He insists he is ‘your friend (not slave)’ (III, 720), thus abandoning his earlier concept of her as an adorable queen (III, 661). His look back at his former self by conceptualising it as an archimage who conjures up a ‘transcendental platan’ of splendid hermetic poetry to court a ‘novice-queen’ (III, 581) shows that in his subjective phase he also claimed royalty for his *élite* audience.

The narrator’s declaration that he has abandoned the self-conceptualisation of the fantastically omnipotent archimage is called into question when he pictures himself as a conjurer of ‘peri or ghou’ at the very end of the text (VI, 871), but that passage is lightened by irony. More disturbing is the less clearly humorous section immediately after the archimage reference, in which the narrator pictures himself as a God gliding away from the universe of his fiction to contemporary Venice (III, 594-9). This analogy with the divine creator and ultimate model for the subjective poet seems strangely out of place as a transition to the passage in which he reports his conversion to objective poetry. Thus, even before the narrator expounds his theory, we are made aware that he at least may not be able to practise what he preaches.

The narrator’s personal inability to embody the objective ideal of ‘Maker-see’ poetics is not expressed in the enounced. But the Venice digression contains many protestations that perfection is generally neither attainable nor desirable. This point is made through the engine metaphor (III, 814-35). At first sight, it seems to be a repudiation of Romanticism in that it substitutes the Romantic organic metaphor of the poem as a supernatural ‘transcendental platan’ with its diametrical opposite, the mechanical engine. However, the metaphor of growth for the engine’s construction (III, 819) once more links it to Romantic organicism. The metaphor states that perfection lies outside the scope of the living poet, but that the imperfect poem is a valuable object of observation. Its interest lies in the fact that it reflects the artist’s process of learning and striving for continual improvement. We are reminded of

Browning's declaration in the dedication that his 'stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul'. The promotion of process over closure here justifies the narrator's and the author's inability to attain perfection. The repetition of this point throughout the digression gives the reader ample occasion to absorb it. But it also betrays Browning's uneasiness about his paradoxical claim of only approximating his ideal and yet not being a failure.

Sordello's speech immediately after the archimage passage explicitly states that a good work of art need not be wholly objective and may contain references to its author. The speech contrasts the minor poet Eglamor, whose whole self is comprised within his work – making the 'song and singer One' (III, 604) – with true poets, whose infinite creative self cannot be contained within a poem – a group from which the narrator's bracketed intervention ironically excludes Sordello, who can posit but not realise that ideal:

[...] from true works (to wit
Sordello's dream-performances that will
Be never more than dream) escapes there still
Some proof the singer's proper life's beneath
The life his song exhibits, this a sheath
To that; a passion and a knowledge far
Transcending these, majestic as they are,
Smoulder; his lay was but an episode
In the bard's life. (III, 606-14)

Presenting a single 'episode / In the bard's life' is literally what Browning does through the Venice digression in *Sordello*. The passage reflects Schlegel's concept that the finite text can only give a glimpse of the boundless plenitude of the author's life beneath it. It also announces Browning's transition to a poetry of functional differentiation. He no longer perceives the artist and his work as identical, although he does not yet deny that the artist is not part of his work at all.

The digression also undertakes to re-educate the reader in acquiring a taste for impersonal and dramatic objective poetry. The passage about the sailor who recounts his voyages (III, 633-55) emphasises that the reader must not expect the poet to tell his life story in his work. The sailor is the positive counterpart to the archimage and the inversion of another central Romantic poet-character, the ancient mariner.¹⁸ Unlike

¹⁸ Woolford and Karlin point out that, despite the clear inversion of the 'Ancient Mariner', the sailor's inland journey might be derived from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (*Poems* 1: 569).

Coleridge's character, whose Romantic egotism compels him to tell his story over and over again and who is on a constant quest for listeners, Browning's sailor is not at all concerned about disappointing his audience when he breaks off his narrative at the first hint of a breeze. The inspiration and potential for a continuation of his life journey which are symbolised by the wind are of much greater importance to him than sharing his observations of the world with his audience. The artist's indifference about communicating his art and self-observation approaches the ideal of the silent poet alluded to in 'One Word More' or at the end of *The Two Poets of Croisic* (1233ff.), a stance which has the advantage of protecting the poet from an uncomprehending reception.

If a full revelation of the poet's self through his work is denied to the audience, what remains for them is to concentrate on the second order observation of the process of the imperfect, yet aspiring poem. A succession of verbs of vision in the engine metaphor, which apply to poet and reader alike, stresses this: 'we watch construct [...] Remark [...] wonder [...] Make out' (814-22). The same duality of the poet's observation of his artistic self and the encouragement of the reader to a second order observation of the text appears in the survey of poetic genres (III, 836-89). It is both the poet's evaluating observation of the genres at his disposal and a dramatic method of educating the reader through his observation of the direct speech by an imaginary naïve audience in response to three different poets. The reader needs to follow the learning process of the imaginary audience and go beyond mere first order observation of a literary text. In response to the first poet, the young lover imprisoned in the Piombi, who reminisces about his love, the audience exclaims: 'That's truth! / (Applaud you) the incarcerated youth / Would say that!' (III, 853-5) And they comment on the description of the depressing urban environment of the second poet Plara: 'Exact the town, the minster and the street!' (III, 875) These two responses show that the audience can only recognise the realism of the inset examples. But they must proceed to a second order observation, which appreciates the tension between the content of the utterances and the situation of the poet-speakers (the imprisoned youth writing about happy lovers, the pastoral idylls which Plara writes while living in the city). The audience's recognition of the juxtaposition of general rule and specific case in the third example about the sad lover Lucio – 'Ay, that's the variation's gist!' (III, 885) – is a

step towards a more comprehensive observation. But they are spurred on to go even further in order to share the vision of the poet, who with their co-operation becomes one of the 'Makers-see': 'Thus far advanced in safety then, proceed!' (III, 886)

The combination of Browning's self-observation and the incitement of the reader to a more judicious observation of his poetry also dominates the presentation of the three self-images and characters that all reappear later in his work: Moses, Hercules and St. John. *Sordello* is the first in a succession of central self-referential poems, including 'One Word More' (see Chapter II.3), 'Pisgah Sights' and the 'Prologue' to *Asolando* (see Chapter VI.2), which establish an analogy with Moses. In her essay 'Biblical Typology and the Self-Portrait of the Poet in Robert Browning', Linda Peterson reminds us that in drawing on biblical types in his autobiographical poems, Browning employs a technique which was common in the nineteenth century. Her analysis of his other poems based on typology shows that he does not use the device to provide an overarching structure for his entire personal or spiritual life, but that he only applies it to single incidents in his development as a poet (241). Browning's recourse to the bible thus corresponds to the selective use he makes of the autobiographical plot and confirms his disregard for narrative unity.

The Moses passage in *Sordello* juxtaposes bad poets, who pretend to make serious statements but are in fact self-important and trivial, with the good poet who does not need to protest. His value is revealed through the miracle of water flowing from the rock, which Cook interprets as Browning's emphasis on 'the miraculous in creative achievement' (*Lyrics* 231). However, the focus here is not on the poet's creativity, but, as in 'One Word More', on his Messianic altruism encoded in this typological prefiguration of Christ's martyrdom. In addition to the sacrifice of literary fame, this may announce Browning's sacrifice of his self as a subject for poetry after *Sordello*. Paradoxically, his salutary act makes the Moses-poet 'forego his Promised Land' (III, 801). In her explanation for this, Peterson assumes that the two biblical passages in which Moses strikes a rock (Exodus xvii, 1-7 and Numbers xx, 1-13) record two separate episodes towards the beginning and the end of the Israelites' flight (245). In the first one, Moses obeys God's orders. In the second one, he acts of his own accord. For Peterson, his unauthorised repetition of the miracle is the reason why God does not let him enter Canaan. She argues that this stands for the poetic

belatedness of the Romantic Browning, who as a latecomer can only repeat a task which his predecessors have already successfully executed (246). However, the poem does not mention the repetition of the miracle. It states instead that Moses strikes the rock ‘awkwardly enough’ (III, 800), an obvious metaphor for Browning’s awkward style. Woolford and Karlin note that this interpretation is supported by Moses’ description of himself as ‘not eloquent [...] slow of speech, and of a slow tongue’ in Exodus iv, 10 (*Poems* 1: 581). The Moses passage therefore seems to argue that Moses’ (alias Browning’s) exclusion is caused by the stylistic avant-gardism of his new poetry which the public must learn to appreciate rather than by the belatedness of the poetics he leaves behind in this passage.

The barred entry into the Promised Land is the Victorians’ addition to the Romantic use of the poet as prophet *motif*. Lawrence Starzyk even speaks of ‘the paradoxical delight [Victorian] artists and critics alike seemed to take in their failure to arrive at the holy place’ (181). The Moses passage appears indeed like a poetic expression of the sentiment in the concluding lines of Matthew Arnold’s ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’:

That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity. (3: 285)

Browning clearly does not share Arnold’s nostalgic definition of the Promised Land as ‘the epochs of Æschylus and Shakespeare’ (*ibid.*). For Browning, the inability to enter it is rather an admission that he cannot quite put his *new* poetic ideal into practice. But the narrator’s turn to the audience and his clumsy appeal for recognition, which is immediately rebuked by the audience’s voice, also intimates that – as in ‘One Word More’, which draws on the same episode – an important defining feature of the Promised Land is having an audience.

The pose as self-sacrificer is confirmed by the next self-image: Hercules (III, 913-20), whom *Balaustion’s Adventure* and *Aristophanes’ Apology* later develop as the mythological epitome of the altruistic hero. Herakles fetches Alkestis from Hades and slays the tyrant Lukos, who threatens to kill Herakles’ family.¹⁹ The reference in

¹⁹ I am using Browning’s spelling of Greek names in *Balaustion’s Adventure* and *Aristophanes’ Apology* here.

Sordello is an acknowledgement that the poet Browning would like to partake of the status of the powerful ‘demigod’ (III, 916) and man of action, who is classed above even the ‘Maker-see’ poet in III, 890-901. The self-conceptualisation as hero liberates him from the prophet with his ballast of Romantic associations. Yet the fact that Browning chooses the episode in Egypt, in which Hercules does not submit to be victimised and slays his sacrificers, betrays that his altruism does not extend to the sacrifice of his poetics to the public’s taste. Such a barbarous wish-fulfilment would not be a step forward towards a democratic co-operation of poet and reader, since it replaces the dominance of the audience’s taste over the author by the reverse case of that of the author’s dominance over the audience, the dead-end solution attempted by *Sordello* in Book II. As a consequence, the narrator explicitly distances himself from Hercules’ conduct, with a reassuring:

Take no affront, my gentle audience! whom
 No Hercules shall make his hecatomb,
 Believe, nor from his brows your chaplet rend –
 That’s your kind suffrage [...] (III, 921-4)

Nevertheless, the sudden change to a demonstratively meek tone in this phrase raises a suspicion as to how serious he is. This suspicion is retrospectively confirmed by the poem’s opening, where the fictional audience is called ‘Fresh-chapleted to listen’ (I, 25). Froula suggests that this mockingly compares their attitude to the naïve credulity of a church congregation, as a way of criticising that the simple-minded reader takes the poet’s word for Gospel (967). This seems odd in view of the fact that firstly, the audience is chosen for its great sensitivity, and secondly, Browning never uses ‘chaplet’ as a synonym for ‘rosary’. ‘Fresh-chapleted’ rather seems to mean that the listeners are crowned with garlands like guests at a banquet. But since Hercules wears a ‘chaplet’ (III, 918) and ‘chaplet’ here clearly means a classical garland for sacrificial victims, it is also possible that the first reference to the object which has such different functions is an intimation of the poem’s aim to revise the audience’s conception of poetry. The adumbration of the sacrifice metaphor with its violent implication in Book I would thus convey how radical the conversion to these poetics is even for a favourably disposed audience.

The end of the Hercules passage evades the tension between the underlying desire for dominance over the audience and the overt denial of it in the enounced

through a sly semantic shift of the word 'chaplet' from Hercules' sacrificial garland in line 918 to the coronet of a poet bestowed on Hercules by the audience's 'kind suffrage' (III, 924). Paradoxically, the wearing of the chaplet now implies the public acknowledgement which the previous lines have just denied. This is possible because the narrator now turns to address his ideal readers Landor and Haworth, whose expectations do not clash with his performance. Yet even they cannot dispense his anxiety about an uncomprehending reception. The book therefore closes on what Tucker calls Browning's 'rigorous demand for a patient reading of his poem' (*Beginnings* 101) through an episode based on the apocryphal *Acts of John*.²⁰ The passage is introduced as an illustration of the injunction:

[...] nor misconceive my portraiture
Nor undervalue its adornments quaint!
What seems a fiend perchance may prove a saint [...] (III, 958-60)

If the reader recognises *Sordello* as a portrait of Browning and the portrayal of the narrator as the main focus of the text, and if he realises the importance of the digressions as more than decoration, the not immediately accessible merits of the poem will be disclosed to him. The analogies are obviously between the reader and St. John, who misunderstands the portrait (i.e. the poem) produced by the awkward but well-meaning Xanthus (alias Browning).

At this point in the text, the enounced has admonished us so often to be vigilant observers of the poem that we can hardly miss the appeal. The question arises therefore whether there is not more implied. The overt exegesis does not make anything of the self-referential aspect of this story about the self-observation of the author and prophet St. John.²¹ Froula is the only critic to consider St. John as a poet. She points out that Browning alters the *Acts of John*, in which the saint mistakes his portrait for that of a beautiful pagan god (974) and lets his St. John take the image for that of the devil. Froula argues that the poet is indeed the devil, mainly because in the *Book of Revelation* St. John appears not as a 'Maker-see' but as one of 'the worst' poets who merely 'say they so have seen' (III, 840) and who thwart reader-participation. She

²⁰ The source was identified by Grube (428).

²¹ Both *Sordello* and 'A Death in the Desert' show that Browning identified the writer of the gospel of St. John with the author of the *Book of Revelation*.

therefore sees Browning's presentation of St. John as a negative counter-image which contrasts with a superior intermediary between God and mankind, 'John's cloud-girt angel' in Book II, 691, who is the actual analogy for the ideal poet.

I cannot agree with Froula's reading. After the elaborate succession of analogies for Browning's new self-conceptualisation in the Venice digression, closing the book on a rejected self-image without unambiguously marking it as such would create an inconsistent and weak ending. Moreover, it is clearly only the awkward representation which makes the picture appear to be the devil. Once its subject has been recognised, St. John is confirmed in his function as a prophet by his disciple Xanthus. I think the passage makes two points. Firstly, Froula herself notes that in the *Acts of John* 26-9 the saint takes his likeness to be a pagan god, although she does not remark on the burlesque element of the episode. Even when looking at his reflection in a mirror, St. John insists it is not a complete but only a physical likeness. He then seizes the opportunity to preach a short sermon against idolatry. My section V.1.1 has shown that Browning's former selves Sordello and, to a lesser extent, the narrator are devilish figures through which the author exorcises his misdirected idolatrous cult of the self. I believe therefore that the episode about St. John's ludicrous confusion and its resolution is a confirmation that Browning has successfully turned from a self-centred fiend into a humanitarian like St. John.

Secondly, the passage is an admission that, like any observation, the author's self-observation is also determined by his particular perspective, so that even he may misjudge and misrepresent himself in the text, which in any case cannot reflect his entire self, just as Xanthus' portrait of St. John is an insufficient physical likeness. This confirms that *Sordello* presents only parts of a self in perpetual process. But the eventual unfolding of St. John's / the reader's / the poet's 'puckered brows' (III, 993) suggests that a certain objective distance – provided by the mediation of Xanthus' / the poet's work – can also help the poet to see himself more clearly after a while.

This passage at the exact centre of the poem thus brings together the two key purposes of the text: the poet's self-conceptualisation through self-observation and the appeal to the reader to switch from first order to second order observation of Browning's self-portrayal. It also fuses the two extended metaphors at the beginning and the end of the text, the reference to *Don Quixote*, which emphasises the

complexities of the poet's self-observation, and the civet metaphor, which is poised between the hope and despair of the audience's better appreciation of the text through a change of perspective.

V.1.6. A First Step towards Functional Differentiation

The analysis of *Sordello* has shown that, despite a lingering nostalgia for the Romantic concept of poetry as comprehensive self-expression, Browning at this early point displays the essential prerequisites for a poetry of functional differentiation. As far as the reader is concerned, the principle of a poetry of second order observation is fully developed, and an effort is made to teach the reader to take a more critical stance towards the text and the authorial voice. With reference to Browning's new self-conceptualisation as a poet, *Sordello* is still very much a transitional work. The author already acts as an objective poet in presenting his fictional selves for observation in dramatic situations. In adopting the idea characteristic of Romantic Irony of the impossibility of encompassing the infinite self in the finite text, the poem represents a first step towards the total separation of the author's self from the literary work, which Luhmann defines as a token of the autonomy of art from other systems in a modern, functionally differentiated society. The poem still draws on traditional methods for the poet's self-conceptualisation, i.e. the omniscient, unified authorial voice and the autobiographical narrative, but both turn out to have lost their epistemological value and are subverted. They are subsequently replaced by Browning's dramatic endeavours and his concentration on the dramatic monologue, which he first uses in 1836 in 'Madhouse Cells' and with which *Sordello* also experiments. The impossibility of comprehensive observation and the suspicion that the limitation of perspective also applies to the poet-narrator is already tentatively suggested (see Chapter V.1.2 and the Don Quixote and St. John passages). Yet the emphasis of the poem is rather on the possibilities which a differentiation of levels of observation holds for the exploration of the various stages of Browning's self and his development.

It was, however, neither Browning's incomplete transition to an exclusion of his self nor his doubting of absolute perspective which proved problematic for the poem's reception, but the highly demanding strategy of second order self-observation. Readers

simply did not understand that the main purpose of the text was the synchronous observation of the stages of Browning's artistic development. Despite his asseverations that he never expected a public success, Browning could not come to terms with the public's and the reviewers' sheer unwillingness to engage with such a difficult poem. His discontent must have been so strong that, even after a gap of twenty-eight years, he felt the need to rewrite *Sordello* in his next narrative poem in *propria persona*. *R&B*, written 1864-68 and published 1868-69, not only returns to *Sordello*'s central motifs, such as the determination of parentage (both of Pompilia and Gaetano), the voice of the public and the role of the papacy; it is also an occasion for Browning to argue his poetics, his relation to genre, the literary tradition and the readership all over again. Most importantly, Browning discovers multiperspectivism as a more accessible framework for second order observation.

V.2. *The Ring and the Book*

In Book I, 839-58 of *R&B*, the speakers in their efforts to grasp the truth of the Roman murder story are compared to a person who is unsuccessfully trying to pick up a stone from the bottom of a pool. He fails because the surface of the water breaks the light and creates the optical illusion that the stone lies in a different place. This metaphor prepares the reader for the discovery that the divergent versions of the story in the following books are always determined by the observer's point of view. The poem thereby makes the issue of the existence of objective truth and absolute perspective its central concern. Interpretations of Browning's use of the device of multiperspectivism in *R&B* either assume that the absolute point of view can be deduced from the entirety of all monologues (Miller *Disappearance* 149), that certain speakers – especially the Pope as God's representative on earth and Fra Celestino – enjoy a privileged perspective (Langbaum *Poetry of Experience* Chapter 3; Whitla 129-37; Raymond 'Pope') or that the monologues are arranged in a pattern which assigns different levels of credibility to the speakers (McElderry; Altick and Loucks 39-40, 76-81; Litzinger; Woolford *Revisionary* Chapter 7; Rigg 20). An opposed view considers the discrepancies between the monologists as an indication that absolute truth is either not existent or at least unobtainable (Crowell *Convex Glass* 182-224). *R&B* thus either

becomes an aesthetic document of ‘how something that once existed slides towards nothingness’ (Swingle 259)²² or is seen to enact the deconstructionist indeterminacy of meaning (Slinn *Discourse* Chapter 5; Findlay).

However, the framing device of two monologues in Browning’s own voice, in which he takes the stance of the omniscient author and narrator, retells the story four times and makes a clear moral judgement in favour of Pompilia, seems to undermine all of these interpretations. Several critics have seen this unwillingness to ‘preserve narrative mystery’ (Roberts *Browning Revisited* 94) as a flaw in the poem’s design.²³ If we suppose that absolute truth is indeed ‘Evolvable from the whole’ (X, 231) of all monologues, the version of the story in Book I deprives the reader of the pleasure of finding the truth for himself through collating Books II-XI; and if we assume that the poem illustrates the impossibility of complete observation, the poet-speaker’s omniscience contradicts the underlying thesis of the rest of the poem. On the surface, the poet’s claim to a privileged insight seems to be sufficiently justified: he is the only speaker to have read all documents in his source, the *Old Yellow Book (OYB)*; he is separated from the events by an objectifying historical distance; and he occupies a higher narrative level than the other – in Genette’s terminology (*Figures III* 238) – intradiegetic speakers, whose utterances he partially transcribes, partially recreates and partially imagines on the basis of the court documents. His monologues are, moreover, like a prologue and an epilogue situated on the threshold between fiction and non-fictional extratextual discourse, so that they can easily appear as the serious expression of Browning’s authorial intention.²⁴ Yet at the same time the enunciation suggests that the poet’s monologues have a fictional status. Through their inclusion in the twelve-book structure, they are integrated into the fictional realm – unlike ‘One Word More’,

²² For L. J. Swingle the poem’s interest is therefore not epistemological but an ontological ‘contest between being and non-being’ (259). Cf. the same emphasis in Erickson (Chapter 7).

²³ Ian Jack’s condemning conclusion is representative: ‘In *The Ring and the Book* [...] the author does “stand by”, so anxious is he that his message should not go by default. The “modernity” of the poem has been exaggerated, alike by Chesterton and by Langbaum, and it is difficult not to see it as other than a dead end in the history of English poetry’ (*Major Poetry* 299). See also Cook (*Commentary* 3), Fairchild, who calls Browning ‘one of the least impersonal of English poets’ (‘Simple-Hearted Casuist’ 240), and Langbaum himself, who thinks Browning is ‘abandoning the dramatic monologue entirely – by speaking in his own voice in the first and last Books in order to establish the *right judgements*’ (*Poetry of Experience* 158).

²⁴ An indication that contemporaries naturally considered Books I and XII to be non-fictional is Tennyson’s remark about Browning’s reading of Book I which he attended: ‘Browning read his Preface to us last night [...]’ (Tennyson *Tennyson Memoir* 59).

which, as the fifty-first poem in *Men and Women*, is unambiguously placed outside the sphere of Browning's fictional 'fifty men and women'. The use of verse and the creation of a dramatic situation of utterance, in which the speaker repeatedly uses imperatives and seems to hand the *OYB* to his interlocutor(s), would also be unusual for a preface and postface.

In view of this ambiguous status of the poet-speaker's monologues and following the lead of the four analyses which doubt the absolute reliability of the speaker's view of the story (Blalock; Sullivan) and his poetics (Menaghan and Dupras), I want to argue that, as in *Sordello*, this character is designed as a fictional version of Browning's self. His views may in many points coincide with those held by the implied author, but his observations of the Roman murder story and his creativity with their biases and limitations are also exposed so that the reader can observe them. The reader has to decide which of the speaker's statements can be attributed to the author and in which places the author takes a more detached (ironic) view of his speaker. In order to discover this, I will seek to determine the varying degrees of distance and proximity between the enounced and the enunciation of Books I and XII on these central aspects of the speaker's self-portrayal.

The analysis is divided into four sections, progressing towards increasing abstraction and higher levels of observation. In a first step, I will contrast the poet's self-portrayal as a realist author, who presents his work as an objective, quasi-historiographic endeavour, with his first order observation of the story as it appears in his narration of the events, which reveals his personal, literary and moral patterns of thought. This will permit us to evaluate whether the poet's version of the story is authoritative or not. Afterwards, I will consider his account of the genesis of Books II-XI, i.e. his second order self-observation of his creative process. I will then examine his general reflections on poetics. I will finally seek to determine if and how the author distances himself from the statements about the epistemological function of art in the enounced and inquire whether he thereby rejects the assumption that absolute observation is possible.

V.2.1. The Poet as First Order Observer of the Story

V2.1.1. The Realist Claim to Historical Accuracy

Book I abounds with the poet-speaker's references to his source, 'this square old yellow Book' (I, 33), which is almost always referred to with the demonstrative adjective or pronoun 'this' (e.g. I, 38, 50, 75, 82, 84, 140, 143) or deictics like 'Here is it all i' the book at last' (I, 414; Sullivan 5). He touches the book (I, 89-90; XII, 220), tosses it into the air (I, 33-4, 84; XII, 226) and repeatedly describes its physical features:

Doubled in two, the crease upon them yet,
For more commodity of carriage, see! –
And these are letters, veritable sheets [...] (I, 689-91)

Here is the first of these, part fresh as penned,
The sand, that dried the ink, not rubbed away,
Though penned the day whereof it tells the deed [...] (XII, 233-5)

(The print is sorrowfully dyked and dammed [...]) (XII, 399)

By this rhetorical sleight of hand, the speaker insinuates that the book's materiality is a guarantee for the authenticity of the facts. But as he suggests at other times (e.g. I, 1179-81), this is not quite the case. The documents are language and as such at one remove from the events, and each deposition is motivated by the speaker's interest in the case.

In basing his literary text on the historical documents of a legal *cause célèbre*, Browning, whose poetry had repeatedly been described as 'realist',²⁵ places himself in the tradition of the realist novel,²⁶ and more precisely in the theoretical discourse of the realist authors who present their novels as the faithful mimesis of reality. In a cultural context which increasingly valued empirical fact above purely imaginative literature, the realists thus situated themselves on the more prestigious side of fact. The poet-speaker's description of his method of composition recalls the meticulous research

²⁵ See the unsigned review of *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* in *The Leader* of 27 April 1850, George Eliot's review of *Men and Women* in the *Westminster Review* of January 1856, Walter Bagehot on 'Caliban Upon Setebos' in *The National Review* of November 1864 (Litzinger and Smalley 140, 177, 275-6) or Joseph Milsand in the *Revue contemporaine* of May 1856 (537). Eliot and Milsand are not representative in their praise of realism in the 1850s, when the term still had a negative connotation.

²⁶ Browning had initially considered the *OYB* as subject matter for a novel and offered it to at least two novelists, Miss Ogle and Anthony Trollope, and also to Tennyson (Orr 251; Allingham 180 and 326).

undertaken by realists like Gustave Flaubert or the Goncourt brothers. The realists primarily saw themselves in analogy to historians and scientists. Thus the Goncourts defended their manner of representation in the preface to *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864) with the claim that the novel could be a ‘Histoire morale contemporaine’ (‘a moral contemporary history’ 56).

As Peckham argues, the techniques of documentation used by the poet in *R&B* even go beyond the realist practice and bear particularly strong resemblances to the historiographic school of Leopold von Ranke, which was introduced to Britain in the 1840s and 1850s (‘Historiography’). The similarity between the method of the literary writer and that of the historian is not that surprising, since von Ranke began his career as a Classics scholar and transferred the hermeneutics of the German classicists to historical research. Instead of relying on the authority of chronicles, von Ranke’s disciples collated unpublished and private sources, also taking into consideration the cognitive processes and motivations of the authors of these primary documents. They thereby engaged in a second order observation of their sources’ first order observations, which bears a structural resemblance to the second order observation of the speaker in the dramatic monologue (*ibid.* 253).

The poet’s account of his research follows von Ranke’s two stages of external and internal criticism (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 20: 572). As part of the external criticism, which establishes the provenance, date and authenticity of the sources, the poet describes how he found the *OYB*, including a rough indication of the date – June 1860 (I, 487) – and the precise location – a flea market stall on the steps of the Riccardi palace in the Piazza San Lorenzo in Florence (I, 50-2). He even converts the price of one lira into the reader-friendly ‘eightpence English’ (I, 39). He also reports a ‘research trip’ to Rome in order to verify some points in the *OYB* (I, 423). The internal criticism, which ascertains the correct understanding of a narrative source through textual criticism, includes the translation of sources from foreign languages and the elimination of corruptions of the text, so that in his synthesis, the Rankean scholar can back up his findings with comprehensible and reliable quotations. Browning’s speaker translates the corrupt Latin from the title-page of the *OYB* (I, 120-31), stressing ‘Word for word, / So ran the title-page’ (I, 132-3). He quotes the verdict and letters at the end of the *OYB* and indicates omissions in his quotations (XII, 209 and 289-90). Quotations from his

source and the characters' direct speech which is reconstructed from it take up 35% of the poet's lines (7.7% in Book I and 79% in Book XII). Of the remaining 65%, much is spent on indirect speech, free indirect discourse or factual information, such as the explanation of the seventeenth-century Roman legal system (I, 146-68).

Despite these resemblances to Rankean research, Browning's general method of presenting his synthesis through the reconstruction of the characters' speeches in Books II-XI would of course not be acceptable for Rankean historiographers. Browning acts indeed like the realist novelists, who – although they often denied or downplayed this – did make creative alterations to their source material. Since the speaker is so intent on emphasising that he recounts 'stern History' (XII, 804),²⁷ which is 'absolutely truth, / Fanciless fact' (I, 143-4), it is possible that in his view of himself and his text – as opposed to his method of research – he models himself on an older historiographic tradition, most prominently represented by Macaulay, Michelet and Carlyle, who clearly influenced novelists. Carlyle's manner of resurrecting historical events through a quasi-literary narrative had already inspired novelists like Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Altick and Loucks, who point out that Carlyle also reflected on the biases of sources, even suggest that Carlyle's anecdote in 'On History' (1830) about the differing observations of the same event by Sir Walter Raleigh and three other observers was an anticipation of Browning's use of multiperspectivism in *R&B* (26-8, see *Carlyle Works* 27: 87).²⁸ What distinguishes Carlyle is his belief that historiography strives towards a poetic ideal and that the historiographer resembles the poet in being a quasi-visionary who can put the chaos of events into order (*Gibson History* 12). In 'On History', Carlyle deplores the insufficiency of existent historical records, saying that important events might have been 'passed over unnoticed, because no Seer, but only mere Onlookers, chanced to be there!' (*Works* 27: 88). When writing his own histories, Carlyle obviously thinks he is the 'great man [...] with transcendental insight' (Irvine and Honan 432), able to synthesise divergent points of view and interpret the facts for the reader. In stating that he 'had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth' (I, 117) after a fascinated but brief reading over of the *OYB* at the

²⁷ This is the 1868-69 reading, which was replaced from 1872 onwards by 'the annalist', which preserves the contrast with 'the babble of a bard' in the following line.

²⁸ Cf. Gibson's discussion of nineteenth-century historiography in which she disputes Peckham's antithesis between von Ranke and Carlyle (*History* 11-14 and 60-72).

vendor's stall and on his short walk home from the flea market, Browning's speaker displays the same confidence in his superior perspective and intuition as Carlyle.²⁹ In the next two sections, I will show how his monologues undermine the principles of objective observation and impartial presentation to which the historian and, by extension, the realist author lay claim, so that the speaker's self-image is called into question.

V.2.1.2. The Poet's Biased Observation of the Story

In the second order observation of his characters, the poet is quick to point out the limitations and personal interests which colour their first order observation of events. He mocks the lawyers' intentional misrepresentation of the facts (I, 168-244) and the Romans' childishly awkward efforts to come up with a moral judgement of the case:

There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,
Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves,
So that you scarce distinguished fell from fleece [...] (I, 645-7)

He further denounces

The instinctive theorizing whence a fact
Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look. (I, 863-4)

In contrast, he is blind to the subjectivity of his own perception. We have established above (Chapter V.2) that there are several points which justify his superior perspective. But instead of proving the poet's objective detachment, the enunciation of his monologues reveals his emotional involvement in the story. Sullivan enumerates several instances of this (6-8). For instance, the repeated seizing of the *OYB* and the excited tossing of it into the air betray an internal tension, which is also released in a highly emotive language, puns and fanciful extended metaphors like 'That was a firebrand at each fox's tail / Unleashed in a cornfield [...]' (I, 215-20), based on Judges xv, 4-5. The third, dramatic narration of the murder discloses his feelings most clearly. His empathy with Pompilia and Caponsacchi when Guido catches up with them in Castelnuovo is so strong that he interpolates his spontaneous reaction to the event:

²⁹ Cf. the echo of the poet's line in the direct speech of the Pope, who, it turns out, decides on intuition: "I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt" (I, 328)

For, whom i' the path did that priest come upon,
He and the poor lost lady borne so brave,
– Checking the song of praise in me, had else
Swelled to the full for God's will done on earth –
Whom but a dusk misfeatured messenger [...] (I, 589-93)

After another shocked interruption of the narrative, 'Oh God that madest man!' (I, 618), the poet elides the murder itself with the exclamation 'Close eyes!' (I, 627). The ellipsis conveys his inexpressible horror and encourages the audience to paint their own picture of the deed.

On the surface, the speaker also asks his audience to come up with their own evaluation of the story, telling them that the Pope's monologue is 'the ultimate / Judgement save yours' (I, 1220-1). Yet when he asks them 'What say you to the right or wrong of that [...] ?' (I, 392-9), the judgemental diction in this rhetorical question compels them to share his interpretation that Pompilia was killed by 'devils' (I, 399). The use of adjectives which imply value judgements about events and characters further undermines his pretence to objectivity. Being the speaker whose view comes closest to the poet's, the Pope, for instance, is called 'kind' (I, 289), 'this great good old Pope' (I, 326), 'good' (I, 821, 1868-69 version), 'simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute' (I, 1222). Even the etymology of his name is cited to prove his integrity. He is 'the Pope's great self, – Innocent by name / And nature too' (I, 300-1). The poet's praise of the pontiff is supported by the direct discourse of the people (I, 320-5), which reflects the popularity of the historical Innocent. He is further indirectly characterised by the digression on his lenient treatment of the Molinists (I, 306-17).³⁰ The poet neither addresses the Pope's self-doubts as they appear in his monologue, nor confronts the opinion of the 'Venetian visitor' and Archangelis, who display a cynical, disenchanted view of him (XII, 147-9 and 314-7).

Is the poet only taking sides with Pompilia because her innocence is so obvious in his source? A close look at the *OYB* reveals that Browning is not as faithful to it as he claims in the poem and in his correspondence with Julia Wedgwood (19 November 1868 and 22 February 1869, Curle 158-9 and 188). He omits to discuss at least two

³⁰ At the same time, the passage serves the speaker to voice his condemnation of religious fanaticism, a clear transgression of his claim to recount only the facts. Cf. the even longer digression on the recourse of the contemporary judicial system (sanctioned by the Church) to torture (I, 981-1014).

points which should feature in a balanced account of the case. Firstly, he does not mention the possibility that Pompilia merely pretends to be illiterate, although the *OYB* and Browning's other speakers strongly suggest she is lying.³¹ Secondly, he does not even take into consideration that Gaetano might be Caponsacchi's son and thus the proof of Pompilia's adultery. Of course, a fictional text is not obliged to adopt every detail from its source – with which the reader would not be familiar anyway –, and it is indeed the author and not the poet-speaker who is responsible for this poetic license. Langbaum even justifies alterations of the facts as a minor evil which is necessary to unveil an otherwise inaccessible truth ('Importance of Fact' 15-6). But the fact that the poet's view is also at odds with some of his speakers suggests that the author wants the reader to notice these discrepancies.

In Susan Blalock's view, the divergences between the poet's version of the story and the accounts by his characters must be a conscious authorial choice, a 'deliberate joke at the narrator's expense which subverts his ecstatic vision's claim to truth-telling' (48). Blalock backs up this claim with the information that before the final emendations to the text for the 1888-89 edition, Browning had been alerted to the fact that in placing the meeting at Castelnuovo at sunset instead of dusk, he opposed the evidence by three other speakers (cf. *Cook Commentary* 17). Browning acknowledged this point but did not make any changes to the poem. In addition to these contradictions between him and other speakers, there are also internal discrepancies within the poet's utterance. The great difference between the highly emotive narration of the story in I, 497-678, the relatively impartial narration in I, 780-823 and the distanced, slightly ironic narration in I, 838-1329 shows that his perspective is far from being stable (Potkay 155).

A private motive underlying these alterations can be deduced from the author's most obvious deviation from the *OYB*, the change of the date of Pompilia's flight from Arezzo to Rome from the night of 29 April to 23 April, St. George's Day.³² DeVane has counted at least thirty references to the St. George legend in the whole text ('Virgin

³¹ See the extended discussion of this point in *Cook's Commentary* (Appendix IV), especially his conclusion that the poem as a whole omits to clear the fictional Pompilia of the suspicion of lying (289).

³² See Hodell (310, n. 184). For an alternative theory proposing that the shift of the date fortuitous rather than intentional, see Jack and Meredith (7: 321).

and Dragon' 104) and has famously drawn an analogy between the legend or its classical equivalent, the Perseus myth, with the biography of Browning the man: the heroically altruistic Perseus / St. George / Caponsacchi / Browning saves the innocent Andromeda / the lady in distress / Pompilia / EBB from the sea monster / the dragon / Guido / Mr Barrett in Wimpole Street. Allusions to the Perseus myth are frequent in other works throughout Browning's career.³³ This apparent reading of his personal story into his texts explains the poet-speaker's emotional involvement and confirms Paul Ricoeur's thesis that the impulse to understand a text is motivated by the reader's desire to conceptualise the world in such a way that it has significance for his individual self (92), which implies that only subjective readings are possible.

In his interpretation of the 'Essay on Chatterton' (1842), Donald Smalley draws a parallel between Browning's projection of his personal situation onto his subject in this early text and *R&B* (*Browning's Essay*). Smalley compares the essay, which defends Chatterton's fake Rowley translations, to its sources. As in *R&B*, Browning here presents himself in the guise of an objective historian, who assesses divergent biographical information on Chatterton. Yet the text soon develops into an idealisation of Chatterton as a misunderstood martyr. Browning surely sympathised with the unacknowledged genius of Chatterton, and he had also started his career with (Romantic) imitations rather than original compositions. In the essay, he justifies Chatterton's fraud and partially imitates it: whereas Chatterton passes off his Rowley poems as translations of authentic fifteenth-century texts, Browning pretends that his essay is an accurate account of Chatterton's life, but he really manipulates the facts, combines quotations from his sources in a misleading way or simply misquotes them to strengthen his own interpretation. We have seen that the poet in *R&B* adopts a similar strategy of laying claim to an objective presentation of verifiable facts, but undermines this principle to support his subjective view.³⁴

Smalley concludes that in the essay as in *R&B*, Browning is unwittingly guilty of a 'glorious misinterpretation' because he reads into the data 'a thoroughly unhistorical

³³ E.g. in *Pauline* (656-7), *Sordello* (II, 211-2) or the *Parleying* 'With Francis Furini'. On the *motif*, see also the articles by Gabbard, J. E. Shaw and Friedman (695-6).

³⁴ A third parallel case in which Browning makes an unjustified claim to historical accuracy for his fictional text is *Paracelsus* with its pseudo-critical apparatus of two learned footnotes and the long translation from the *Biographie Universelle*. Browning is surely exaggerating when he claims in his 'Note' to the poem: 'The liberties I have taken with my subject are very trifling [...].'

revelation of spiritual redemption', 'reshaping his material to his own view of the truth' and his 'familiar patterns of thought' (*Browning's Essay* 18 and 49).³⁵ I think this thesis needs to be modified. Given that Browning had gained experience at conducting serious historical research through his collaboration on John Forster's *Life of Strafford* (1836), it is not likely that his misquotations in the essay were due to inadvertence. It seems instead that in both the essay and *R&B* the author is aware of his transgression of the historian's rules of impartiality and of his hidden self-projection. By exposing this mechanism in the poet-speaker through indications of his biased perspective, the author of *R&B* signals his detachment from it. So, in comparison to the early essay, the more mature Browning adds the dimension of an ironic self-observation within the text.

The view that Books I and XII are intended as Browning's *autopastiche*³⁶ of his tendency for self-projection is supported by the references to EBB in the text. The choice of her Castellani ring as the central metaphor, although there is no need to refer to a particular ring, and the invocations of the muse at the end of both monologues draw the reader's attention to the omnipresence of his wife in Browning's mind. This would encourage those contemporary readers who knew elements of the Brownings' love story to search for other traces of the poet's private self in his text.

A final detail unearthed by DeVane situates the use of the Perseus myth in *R&B* in a larger framework: above Browning's desk in his room in the parental home in Camberwell hung an engraving of Polidoro da Caravaggio's rescue of Andromeda, a painting which Browning described to EBB as 'my Polidoro's perfect Andromeda' (26 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 99).³⁷ DeVane therefore concludes that Browning did not project his biography onto his work but, on the contrary, through re-enacting Perseus' action, he modelled his life on a pre-existing literary *motif* ('Virgin and Dragon' 99-

³⁵ See also Smalley 'View of Fact'.

³⁶ Genette (*Palimpsestes* 136) identifies objectivity, one of Browning's prime characteristics, as a necessary precondition for *autopastiche*: '[...] elle suppose à la fois une conscience et une capacité d'objectivation stylistique peu répandues. Il y faut sans doute un écrivain doué en même temps d'une grande individualité stylistique [...]'. ('[...] it demands both a consciousness and a capacity for stylistic objectivation that are very rare. It requires undoubtedly a writer who is at the same time endowed with a highly individualised style [...]', my translation) Browning certainly also fulfils the latter requirement, or he would not have been such an easy target for pastiches and parodies by others.

³⁷ The reference appears in a revealing context. Browning presents himself as the rescuer of Andromeda, not from the sea monster but from boorish company. He reports that he found the engraving in a portfolio where Andromeda was facing a print of 'Boors Carousing by Ostade'.

100).³⁸ According to Aristotle's definition, the use of recurring, universal *motifs* is a feature which distinguishes literary from historiographic texts, which are concerned with singular, past events (*Poetics* Chapter 9). So even when making sense of his real life, Browning apparently cannot help applying literary categories in his observation.

V.2.1.3. Literary Patterns in the Observation of the Story

In *R&B*, too, the enunciation shows that the poet-speaker perceives the story to a great extent through literary patterns, especially traditional *motifs* and generic stereotypes.³⁹ Browning's view of Pope's *Iliad* translation as 'history so true' in 'Development' (39) serves as a reminder that the categories of history and literature have always been blurred. But the poet in *R&B* has so much recourse to literary patterns that his self-conceptualisation as a quasi-historian is seriously undermined. This draws attention to the inherent contradiction between the theoretical claim by authors in the realist tradition to imitate the historian's objective method and their actual literary manner of presentation.

The poet's reference to stereotypes and his reduction of most characters to unambiguously good or evil flat characters seem first of all designed to make the audience take Pompilia's side. Caponsacchi's action is justified by the identification with the altruistic Christian saint (I, 585), and the presentation of Pompilia as the 'lady in distress' from the romance tradition calls for a sympathetic reaction. Like the Virgin Mary, she gives birth to her first son around Christmas and is thus cleared of the suspicion of adultery. Other biblical allusions include the wolf and sheep metaphor, which integrates the Pope as the shepherd of Christianity (I, 648-9), and the portrayal of Guido as devil (I, 399), Lucifer (I, 623) and, in the words of Ephesians ii,2, 'Prince o' the Power of the Air' (I, 567 and 597). However, in the context of Victorian anti-Catholic prejudice, this liberal use of biblical allusions would probably less sway the

³⁸ Peckham goes a step further than DeVane. He considers Browning's whole private life, including the love for EBB and his separation of private and public self, as a deliberate role playing (*Victorian Revolutionaries* Chapter 3).

³⁹ Altick and Loucks (7-8) detect in the poem elements of the epic, the novel, the romance, the medieval story-cycle, the morality play and the novella (through pastiches of the chapter headings of the *Decamerone* in Book I). See also Hair (*Genre* 121-6).

Protestant reader in favour of Pompilia than awaken his scepticism of Catholic stereotypes and the speaker's uncritical adoption of them.

Especially in the second narration (I, 497-678), the biblical imagery is mixed with fantastic elements: Guido is 'the main monster' (I, 551), supported by his 'satyr-family' (I, 570), his brothers, who are 'Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this, / Cat-clawed the other' (I, 549-50), and his labourers, referred to as 'were-wolves' (I, 611). Pompilia's time in Arezzo appears as a witches' sabbath, during which she will be sacrificed. Caponsacchi's sudden intervention, which is reminiscent of the dramatic device of *deus ex machina*, is described in the hyperbolic diction of romance with archaisms and exaggerated alliterations:

The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
 Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i' the dust the crew,
 As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,
 Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest
 Bearing away the lady in his arms,
 Saved for a splendid minute and no more. (I, 583-8)

The mock-heroic effect created by the diction and the accumulation of *clichés* could be attributed to the speaker as an intermittent irony towards his story or himself (Thompson 'Authorial Detachment' 672). But since it is so incongruous with his overall sincere and serious sympathy with Pompilia and Caponsacchi, it is more likely to be an indication in the enunciation of the ironic distance of the author who exposes the speaker's strained endeavours to fit his story into the mould of a heroic plot. As in the case of the speaker's use of predominantly Catholic biblical stereotypes which may arouse the Protestant's suspicion, the satirical discrediting of the seemingly innocent romance heroine in e.g. William Makepeace Thackeray's fiction might have led the contemporary reader to be critical of the speaker's naïve use of the romance pattern here.

The two invocations of the muse⁴⁰ and the twelve-book structure have even more ambitious implications. They suggest that the speaker, and indeed the author, since the numbering of the books should be attributed to him, wish to situate *R&B* in the epic tradition. The fact that of all literary genres Browning chooses the highest one makes the crisis of the definition and status of poetry in the nineteenth century

⁴⁰ For the biblical and epic allusions in the invocations, see Chapter II.4.

particularly transparent. Dante Gabriel Rossetti reports that Carlyle condescendingly called the Franceschini case, which was appropriately found among the *bric-à-brac* of a flea market (I, 75-81), ‘an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting’ (Hill 284). Such a domestic story was hardly acceptable in the poetry of the period, but it could be treated in the realist novel, which specialised in the portrayal of the fate of private individuals. This is probably why, when justifying his method of multiperspectivism, the poet calls his subject matter a ‘novel country’ (I, 1348). The pun on ‘novel’, meaning both ‘innovative’ and ‘novelistic’, emphasises that – in contrast to *Sordello*, whose narrative genre is dictated by the audience’s taste – Browning now feels confident to choose a subject and manner of presentation which are the prerogative of the prose genre and relatively new in poetry. In this context, the choice of EBB as his muse is not only a sign of his personal emotional involvement but also makes a point about poetics. Her novelistic *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is a key precursor text for *R&B*, which tries to map out a new space for the Victorian narrative poem of epic length and scope.⁴¹ Browning clearly disregards the predominant view of poetry, which associates verse with ‘high’, edifying subjects and style. Tennyson’s comment on *R&B* is indicative:

He [Browning] is a great friend of mine. ... But it does not follow that I should put up with obsolete horrors, and unrhythmical composition. What has come upon the world that it should take any metrical (?) [sic] arrangement of facts for holy Poesy? (Tennyson *Tennyson and His Friends* 52)

Browning’s solution for appealing to those contemporaries with a more conservative notion of poetry is therefore to align *R&B* with the epic through its structure. But aware that epic and heroic patterns are so incongruous at the period and for his plot, the author makes the epic echoes in the enunciation of the poet-speaker’s discourse appear slightly pretentious and humorous. The author can thus both use and dismiss these conventions and demonstrate his awareness of this inconsistency.

In sum, we have seen in the poet’s observation of the story his assumption that, unlike his monologists, he can access fact thanks to his historicist-hermeneutic method

⁴¹ There may, however, be an ironic edge to the allusion to EBB as a model in the line ‘A novel country: I might make it *mine*’ (I, 1348, my emphasis). Browning becomes EBB’s rival by making the same claim to recreating and appropriating the genre of the long poem as she in the opening lines of *Aurora Leigh*.

of research. His use of the theatre metaphor implies that the story could even speak for itself:

Let this old woe step on the stage again!
Act itself o'er anew for men to judge [...] (I, 824-5)⁴²

Moral evaluations are for him inherent in the events and inevitably call forth an emotional reaction. He fails to notice that these judgements must be ascribed to his subjective perspective as a first order observer of the story. The reader may take the stance of a critical second order observer of the poet's renditions of the story, which reveal how he strives to reduce the complexity of the data and to create coherence by imposing his own patterns of thought, both literary and moral. Three major tensions expose his position as biased and precarious: first, the tension between his perspective and that of his speakers; second, his claim to objectivity in the enounced and his personally motivated subjectivity apparent in the enunciation; and third, his conflicting strategies of enhancing the status of his text, the historicist-realist approach which does not agree with the biblical imagery, the romance and the epic tradition, from all of which realism distances itself.

R&B thus adds a further dimension to the focus on second order observation which Luhmann identifies as a characteristic of the novel from the eighteenth century onwards. Whereas the psychological novel only demonstrates the characters' inability to observe the world objectively and probes into the hidden motives which determine their subjective point of view (Luhmann *Kunst* 142-3), *R&B* does the same on a higher level and also calls into question the omniscient perspective of the author and narrator. Finally, through the many references to the poet's reading of the *OYB* – 'And on I read / Presently, [...] Still read I on, [...] the while I read and read' (I, 100-1, 110, 477) – and in depicting him as a clearly limited reader, the poem also implies that the inability to observe the world completely extends to the reader. The fact that the poet has no direct access to the story but has to rely on the textualised observations of the events as they appear in the *OYB* serves as a reminder that the reader, too, can only be a second order observer of the text he is given. He can at best perceive the events through the filter of other consciousnesses, including the additional one of the author.

⁴² This is again a clear step forward in relation to *Sordello* (I, 11-31), where the narrator would have liked to, but could not let his story enact itself dramatically without his mediation.

V.2.2. The Second Order Observation of the Poem's Genesis

The speaker's explicit account of the genesis of Books II-XI, his elaborate use of metaphor as a metadiscourse for his creativity and the irony he displays when addressing the issue of his reputation are indications of a high self-consciousness. They suggest that we will not find the contradictions between enounced and enunciation in his second order self-observation of the monologues' genesis to be as stark as in his first order observation of the story.

V.2.2.1. The Ring Metaphor

The poet compares his creation of the intradiegetic monologues with the forging of EBB's Castellani ring. The gold undoubtedly stands for factual evidence, i.e. 'truth / Fanciless fact' (I, 143-4). This equation is supported by other terms from the semantic field of metal, e.g. 'pure crude fact' (I, 35 and 86) or the paronomasia 'the truth, / The untempered gold, the fact untampered with' (I, 364-5). The precise tenor for the vehicle 'alloy', which is required to give permanent shape to the gold, is not so evident. Only over four hundred lines into his monologue does the poet refer to it again, and then offers slightly different alternatives. The double use of 'fancy' (I, 464 and 679) has led to the predominant interpretation which identifies the alloy with the creative imagination (Irvine and Honan 430). Yet the more general phrases 'Something of mine' (I, 462), 'motions of mine' (I, 701) and the rather vague 'soul' (I, 469, 723, 750) intimate that the poet invests a greater part of his personality, of which the imagination is only a part (Sullivan 10). The term 'repristination' (I, 23) for the corrosion of the alloy through acid, so that 'Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore' (I, 28) remains, and the poet's self-references as an 'artificer' (I, 18) who emulates the 'smithcraft' (I, 470) of the Castellani 'Craftsmen' (I, 9) echo the definition of the objective poet in the 'Essay on Shelley' as 'the fashioner', whose self is completely absent from his text and from whom we only learn 'the fact itself' (1001).

In establishing an analogy with a rationally comprehensible chemical process which is executed by goldsmiths, the poet demystifies artistic creativity. He is again in line with the theory of the objective poet, who adapts his poetry to the 'narrower

comprehension' of the 'average mind' of his readers ('Essay on Shelley' 1001). Up until *R&B*, catering for mediocre intellects had not been Browning's speciality. Reviews had repeatedly deplored his 'not seeming to care for the enjoyment, or the instruction he could afford his fellow-creatures'.⁴³ The speaker's sardonic address to the 'British Public, ye who like me not, / (God love you!)' (I, 410-11 and 1379-80), which undergoes the optimistic modification 'British Public, who may like me yet, / (Marry and amen!)' (XII, 835-6), displays a somewhat reluctant resignation to stoop to the standards of the common reader. It recalls Browning's decision in the 1863 dedication to *Sordello* to 'turn [his] work into what the many might, – instead of what the few must, – like'. In appealing to a domestic audience with the connotation of commercial interest inherent in the term 'Public', Browning has come a long way from the ambitious summoning of a ghostly audience of cosmopolitan literary geniuses in *Sordello* (I, 44-73).⁴⁴ The apparently neat ring metaphor is aimed at those among his contemporaries whose world view is determined by empiricism and who do not accept Romantic inspirational poetics.⁴⁵ The poet's plea for attention, '(beseech you, hold that figure fast!)' (I, 142), his insistence on the importance of his metaphor and his heavy-handed semiotic analysis of it suggest that he is not counting on a particularly alert, sophisticated audience: "'T is a figure, a symbol, say; / A thing's sign: now for the thing signified' (I, 31-2). Kay Austen interprets this awkwardly didactic strategy as Browning's serious endeavour to assist the obtuse common reader in understanding his poem, in order to finally attain the public fame which had hitherto been denied to him (22-3). It does not occur to her, as it does to Joseph Dupras, that the speaker's exaggerated courting of the audience's taste for overt didacticism and simple explanations for complicated issues may be the author's ironic feint, which satirises the gullibility of the common reader:

⁴³ G. Brimley – T. C. C., *Frazer's Magazine* January 1856 (quoted in Litzinger and Smalley 166). 'T. C. C.' has not been identified. For quotations of more contemporary reviews which criticise Browning's wilful obscurity, see Austen (18-22).

⁴⁴ This first extended comment on his lack of popularity comes at a point when Browning's sales are on the rise, after the relative success of the 1863 *Poetical Works* and *Dramatis Personae* of 1864 (cf. Watkins 'Browning's Fame' 494). It appears that he is only able to engage in a second order observation of this great disappointment at a time when the situation has improved.

⁴⁵ Cf. also Shaw's interpretation of the poet-speaker as a 'critic as positivist' (*Victorians and Mystery* 317).

Aware that his popularity depends so much on the ability to figure out what he is doing by using customary responses or perspectives, he obligingly tells them [the audience] what they want to hear and shows them what they expect to see. (28)

I believe that Browning goes a step further and also directs his irony towards himself here. An indication of this can be found in occasional references to the situation of utterance, in which the speaker seems to hand the *OYB* to an interlocutor, thereby suggesting that he addresses a (group of) representative(s) of the 'British Public' in a room in London (I, 38, 89, 375, 774-5). Although these references do not suffice to evoke a dramatic situation, as in *RCNCC* for instance, they are enough to make us aware of the similarity between the poet's position and that of the speaker of a dramatic monologue. Like any monologist, he is intent on winning the approbation of his audience. In this section, I intend to show how Books I and XII serve the purpose of Browning's ironic self-observation of his endeavours to adapt to the audience's taste.

There are indications in the enunciation that the author does not endorse the simplistic didacticism voiced in the enounced and that he does not fully submit to the demands of the broader public. The much discussed ring metaphor is a case in point. Its enunciation reveals a greater complexity than the level of the enounced, which I have just summarised. As Paul Cundiff has argued, it is quite obvious that the speaker's representation of the forging process is simplified and therefore falsifying ('Clarity').⁴⁶ The fact that gold jewellery is not 100% gold is common knowledge. The real Browning surely knew this too, since *EBB* reports a visit to the Castellani manufacture in her correspondence (Kenyon *Letters of EBB* 2: 354-5). If the alloy were completely corroded from the ring, it would not retain its shape. The application of the acid only removes those molecules of the alloy which are on the surface of the ring, so that a thin film of pure gold covers the surface. Through the precise choice of words, the enunciation gives two hints that only the 'face' of the ring is affected:

⁴⁶ Cf. the controversy on the metaphor between Cundiff and Langbaum in the *Victorian Newsletter* 15-17 (Spring 1959 – Spring 1960).

Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume [...] (I, 23-5)

And so, by one spirt, take away its trace
Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring. (I, 1388-9)

'[J]ustifiably golden' states that from a chemical point of view the ring is not pure gold, but that according to superficial optical criteria it can be considered as such. For most critics (Wasserman 'Meaning of Ring-Figure' 426; Menaghan 268-9; Sullivan 10) this aspect of the metaphor stands for the withdrawal of Browning's voice from Books II-XI, in which he only acts through his fancy, as the invisible author below the surface of the monologists' speeches. The poet-speaker's claim in the enounced that the author is completely absent from his text if his voice is not heard is therefore exaggerated.

In the course of Book I, the enounced, too, stresses the contribution of the author. A linear analysis of the references to the poem's genesis in Book I will reveal how the speaker modifies this initial self-portrayal as an uninvolved craftsman in favour of one which lays more emphasis on his creative agency. After his first narration of the story (I, 141-363), which presents him as the meticulous, objective historical researcher gathering his data, the poet addresses the 'British Public' for the first time (I, 410). He informs them that his mission as a poet is to preserve truth from decay, an assertion which he stresses through the repetition of 'truth' at the beginning and end of line 413. But he goes on to admit that when he confronted people in Rome to whom he had turned for information on the Franceschini case, they dismissed his ambition to find the truth and accused him of being driven by a political motivation, an attack on the papal right to secular power (433-5). Acting as another representative of the common reader's taste, the voice of these Italian interlocutors finally advises the poet not to give too much importance to the truth value of his text. They admit that they neither care nor believe that he is fully faithful to his data, since poetic license is 'the custom of the country' (I, 442). They ask:

'Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,
Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,
(The while you vault it through the loose and large)
Hang to a hint? Or is there a book at all,
And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like?' (I, 451-6)

Adopting an empiricist point of view, they demote fiction to a harmless lie, whose quality is not determined by its truth value. Their ideal of a ‘pretty piece of narrative’ (I, 448) defines art solely through aesthetic criteria and its capacity to entertain, thereby dismissing the pretensions of poets in the Romantic tradition who claim to be mediators of truth. The choice of the adjective ‘pretty’ implies relatively undemanding aesthetic standards, a further indication of their empiricist denigration of art.⁴⁷ They intimate that the poet’s only chance of accessing dogmatic truth would be if he mended his ways and converted to Catholicism, like his compatriots Manning and Newman – an idea which Browning burlesques through the word-plays on these names and that of Wiseman (I, 442-6).

‘Yes and no!’ (I, 457) the poet exclaims in reply to the question whether his text is ‘make-believe’. Caught between his own standards and the public’s, he attempts to bridge this gap by modifying his ring metaphor. He begins by affirming his objective claim that he took everything ‘From the book, yes’ (I, 458), but as a concession to the audience’s expectations, the added ‘Something of mine’ (I, 462) is accorded a growing importance. The emphasis on his imaginative intervention is even used to underline that his poem is mediating truth: without subverting the established connotation of gold as precious, he describes the alloy as ‘something else surpassing that [gold]’ (I, 461), because it makes the otherwise useless metal malleable (Cundiff ‘Clarity’ 1280).⁴⁸ This point is reinforced by several parallel metaphors in which fancy acts on fact (I, 465-8). The two elements are woven together so closely that they become almost identical: ‘Fancy with fact is just one fact the more’ (I, 464).

In his second narration (I, 497-678), the poet gives even more room to his agency, but changes strategies by clearly modelling himself on the Romantic poet as prophet, the concept which is still potent with some members of the public, but diametrically opposed to the empiricist view of poetry which he tried to accommodate before and during the first narration. Having put aside the *OYB*, he produces a visionary narrative. Through its value judgements and biographical projections, it displays his proximity to the subjective poet or ‘seer’, whose poetry is ‘indeed the very radiance

⁴⁷ In ‘Beatrice Signorini’, Browning endorses this view by self-deprecatingly describing his poem as a ‘pretty incident I put in rhyme’ (352).

⁴⁸ Cf. the same metaphor in *The Two Poets of Croisic* (1209-16).

and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated' ('Essay on Shelley' 1002). Like the subjective poet, the speaker aspires to the absolute divine perspective, hoping to share God's ability to 'apprehend [...] all things in their absolute truth, – an ultimate view' ('Essay on Shelley' 1002). He is the omniscient narrator, who can read thoughts and see different places at the same time, just as his position on the balcony of Casa Guidi gives him a bird's eye perspective of Florence. The *OYB* would have been lost, had it not been that he of all people 'haply, wandering that lone way, / Kicked it up' (I, 674-5). But this is no coincidence. He alerts us early on that, like the prophet-poet, he acts under divine guidance:

(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
Always above my shoulder, pushed me once [...] (I, 40-1)

After this narration, the syntax places 'fancy' before 'fact' (I, 679) and 'such alloy, / Such substance of me' before 'gold' (I, 681-2). As Dupras points out, the poet's 'finger[ing]' (I, 684) of the ring on the metaphorical level and his playful touching of the *OYB* which draw on the common etymological root of 'finger' and 'fiction', emphasise the poet's manipulation of his material (30).

The question "How much of the tale was true?" (I, 686) suddenly reminds the poet how far he has strayed from his initial objective self-conceptualisation and given in to the taste for imaginative fiction. He redresses this balance with the reply: 'I disappeared' (I, 687). And after having spent the first eight lines of this verse paragraph outlining his creative contribution, he devotes the next nine lines to a description of his documents, thereby stressing his neutral adherence to the facts. The paragraph closes on the confident assumption that he satisfies both the empiricist and the Romantic concept of poetry:

Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse?
Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale? (I, 696-7)

The signifier 'truth' here clearly refers to two different signifieds: on the one hand, 'truth' as synonymous with 'fact', as in 'absolutely truth, / Fanciless fact' (I, 143-4) or 'indisputably fact' (I, 665), and on the other hand, 'truth' as intuitive, moral or spiritual

truth.⁴⁹ This definition of the term accounts for the poet's claim to have grasped 'the whole truth' (I, 117) of the story after only having leafed through the *OYB*.

The juxtaposition of the adjectives 'live' and 'dead' establishes a hierarchy among these two kinds of truth, which the following paragraph tries to justify. Starting off with the empiricist premise that 'there is nothing in nor out o' the world / Good except truth' (I, 698-9), the poet has to admit that fiction 'proves good' thanks to its moral value, 'yet seems untrue' (I, 700). For a few lines he astutely avoids using the word 'fiction' with its negative connotation of 'lies', which makes it the antonym of 'truth', by substituting it with the periphrases 'this, the something else' (I, 699) and 'motions of mine' (I, 701). He only names 'fiction' when he has prepared the ground for his argument that it is an indispensable tool for revealing truth:

Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too? (I, 704-5)

The interrogative mode throughout the paragraph serves as a protective shield for his reshaping of definitions.

V.2.2.2. The Resuscitation Metaphor

In comparison to such ambitious Romantic tenets about the function of poetry as Shelley's phrase of the poets as the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' ('Defence' 59), Browning's definition of fiction as a necessary means to convey fact reduces the status of poetry dramatically. But it has the advantage of being a viable argument for the practical importance of art within the empiricist framework. The speaker offers several metaphors for fiction as a preserver of fact from the decay of time: the facts are compared to a harvest which will be shaved off with a scythe (I, 420-1), to sandstone which is easily eroded (I, 661-73), to a rocket which rises and falls back onto earth (XII, 2-21), to a falling, fading star and an ember (XII, 827-34). The number of metaphors shows how intent the poet is on convincing his audience of these new, unfamiliar poetics.

⁴⁹ Crowell examines the polysemy of 'truth' for the whole poem (*Convex Glass* 208-23). He defines the Pope's notion of 'truth' as 'virtue, goodness, rectitude' (217) and Fra Celestino's as 'virtue, purity, innocence' (221). See also Cundiff 'Our Human Speech'.

He also develops a second extended metaphor for his poetic revival of facts. Like the ring metaphor, the resuscitation metaphor displays a self-conceptualisation as objective and uninvolved in the enounced but betrays a Romantic substratum in the enunciation. Its vehicle comes closer to traditional metaphors for the creative process than the ring metaphor. The enounced defines man in opposition to the divine creator, whose 'Inalienable [...] arch-prerogative' (I, 720) of creativity he does not possess. This is a clear dismissal of what the speaker considers the hubris of Romantic poetics, which likens artistic to divine creativity.⁵⁰ In his view, a poet can at best imitate a fraction of God's creation:

Man, – as befits the made, the inferior thing, –
 Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
 [...]
 Repeats God's process in man's due degree,
 Attaining man's proportionate result, –
 Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps. (I, 712-3 and 717-9)

More clearly than in the ring metaphor, the enounced here agrees with the empiricist devaluation of art.

Yet when we turn to the enunciation, it is striking that throughout the passage I, 707-72 the poet can only define himself in relation to God. Mary Ellis Gibson points out that the imagery of sparks reluming a wick (I, 735-8) is a reduction of the traditional vatic attributes of fire and light and argues that the speaker thereby distances himself from Romantic pretensions (*History* 56 and 86-9). However, at the end of her analysis of the Pope's, Caponsacchi's and the poet's use of the spark and wick imagery, which is a reference to the Old Testament oil lamp in the tabernacle,⁵¹ Gibson concludes that 'we are led to feel that the poet's special gift, despite its limitations, is a connection to the absolute' (*ibid.* 89). Similarly, the poet's breath which relumes the wick (I, 735) imitates God's breathing of life into Adam (Genesis ii, 7). The frequent use of the conjunctions 'but' (I, 719, 741) and 'yet' (I, 714, 729, 746) to introduce phrases about the poet reveal how reluctant the speaker is to accept his inferiority. His repressed

⁵⁰ Woolford points out Browning's progressive shyness to draw an explicit analogy between artistic and divine creativity (*Revisionary* 128). This also appears in the distinction between Shakespeare's and God's creativity in 'The Names' (13) of 1884 (cf. fn. 36 to Chapter IV).

⁵¹ Exodus xxvii, 20-1; Leviticus xxiv, 2-4; 1 Samuel iii, 3; 2 Chronicles iv, 20.

desire to equal God is even detectable at the centre of the highly self-deprecating passage I just quoted. The lines I omitted read:

Yet *forced* to try and *make*, else fail to grow, –
Formed to *rise*, *reach at*, if not grasp and *gain*
The good beyond him, – which attempt is growth, – [...] (I, 714-6, my emphasis)

Such a passage is an obvious manifestation of Browning's poetics of process which replace the Romantic confident striving for absolute identification with God by an awareness that this eternal striving will never be successful (Miller 'Theme of Disappearance' 220). But a comparison of the italicised verbs in the above quotation with the description of the subjective poet in the 'Essay on Shelley' reveals that this concept is not so radically new: 'He [...] is *impelled* to *embody* [...] – an ultimate view *ever aspired to*, if but *partially attained*, [...] towards these he *struggles*' (1002, my emphasis). The new poet as striving recreator thus turns out to be a less ambitious version of the Romantic poet.

A nostalgia for Romantic aspirations also shines through the direct speech of the 'mage' (I, 744-59). Adam Roberts argues that the description of the mage seems to be inspired by the writings on the resuscitating power of souls detached from their bodies by the Christian alchemist Cornelius Agrippa ('The Mage'). However, the mage's self-conceptualisation is also reminiscent of the practices of occult pseudo-scientist like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. In a ghostly, gothic scenario, the mage, like Frankenstein, uses the unnatural method of galvanism to bring to life 'Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse' (I, 753). At the moment of resuscitation, the mage calls himself 'spark-like' (I, 755). In claiming for himself this attribute which is used in two other places to describe the ephemeral nature of the facts (I, 6 und XII, 833), he promotes his power from bestowing life to being life itself. The implicit analogy with Mary Shelley's 'Modern Prometheus' and the explicit one with Faust (I, 459) – both characters who are punished for usurping the divine privilege of creation – denounce the Romantic identification with God.

The speaker avoids this danger for himself by projecting it onto the mage and observing it as hetero- instead of self-reference. For his own self-image, he chooses the Old Testament prophet Elisha, a figure who does not question the hierarchy between man and God, imitation and original creation, and who is not involved in a perverse

bricolage of body parts. His revival of an intact body is less creative; but he, who is repeatedly called the 'man of God' in the Old Testament, never challenges the divine authority. The speaker's divine authorisation is reinforced by the almost literal quotation of the account of the episode of Elisha's resuscitation of the dead child in the King James Bible (2 Kings iv, 33-5) in lines 762-71.

All of a sudden, the speaker realises in a retrospective observation of his utterance that over the last hundred lines he has again indulged in extended self-reference. Opening on a determined 'Enough of me! / The Book!' (I, 773-4), the next paragraph returns to the facts. Yet even the transition to this third, and most objective, narration of the story is disturbed by a self-description, in which his glistening eyes and his hair standing on end are clear references to the inspired *vates*:

A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,⁵²
Letting me have my will again with these
– How title I the dead alive once more? (I, 776-9)

V.2.2.3. Oscillations Between Objectivity and Subjectivity

On the whole, the poet's second order observation of the poem's genesis thus shows the same conflict between objectivity and subjectivity as his first observation of the story. But, as can be expected from a speaker who is capable of a self-conscious observation of his method, the conflict is not exclusively between objectivity in the enounced and subjectivity in the enunciation. Instead, the speaker sometimes quite consciously draws on Romantic concepts in the enounced. An abrupt transition as the one just noted indicates that he is at least partially aware of his inconsistencies.

The last eighty-six lines of Book I highlight through rapid shifts between the objective and the subjective approach how torn the speaker is between these two extremes. The ending of the monologue thereby gives an edge to Browning's critical self-observation of his internal conflicts and his dilemma of trying to satisfy different tendencies among the general public, empiricists and the adherents of Romantic poetics.

⁵² This self-portrayal seems to be inspired by that of the vatic speaker of 'Kubla Khan' with 'His flashing eyes, his floating hair!' (50). Cf. the gypsy woman in 'The Flight of the Duchess' – also echoing 'Kubla Khan' – who transmits these physical phenomena to the duchess and even to the speaker (529-56).

It also brings back into focus the author's ironic play with the audience, alerting susceptible readers that he does not endorse the speaker's adaptation to the standards of the common reader.

After his last narration (I, 838-1329), the poet compares himself to a mountain guide who has led his audience 'from the level of to-day / Up to the summit of so long ago' (I, 1331-2). The guidance he provides, which is emphasised by the verbs 'I led you [...] I point you [...] Let me [...] slope you back [...] Land you [...]' (I, 1331-5), on the surface satisfies the part of the audience that expects didactic instruction from poetry. But at the same time their taste is attacked through the ironic denigration of the facile idyllic themes of contemporary popular poetry, which are represented by the pastoral, peaceful grazing on the plain (I, 1334-9).⁵³ In contrast, Browning's more ambitious, historical theme gives the reader a wider perspective – what Peckham terms a 'culture transcendence' of his own epoch (*Victorian Revolutionaries* 108).

The aspiration of Browning's poetry to a 'country in the clouds' (I, 1341) is described in Romantic imagery. His readers will see more than an eagle. This bird, which is according to mythology the only creature that can look straight into the sun, is traditionally identified with the visionary poet.⁵⁴ Heaven can only be reached through the ladder of the poet's fancy. This recalls the description of the subjective poet as 'the poet of loftier vision, [who] lift[s] his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere [...]' ('Essay on Shelley' 1004), and also the ladder imagery in the essay:

[...] 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. (1004)

The speaker thus promises the audience the kind of transcendental insight which Romanticism often claims for itself. However, if we consider the implications of the poet's comparison of his aspiring fancy with the hero of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' (I, 1347) in the enunciation, his pretence to mediate transcendental truths becomes

⁵³ The hill and valley imagery might be an echo of a passage in Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria*, in which Coleridge distinguishes the poet, who explores the hilltops and sources of rivers, from ordinary men, who stay in the valley (137-8). The speaker of 'A Grammarian's Funeral' makes the same distinction between 'the unlettered plain' and the mountain 'Crowded with culture!' (11 and 12), but in this poem the value of the mountain is ambiguous. It is both the sterile place where learning (in the shape of the grammarian) is buried and, especially in the closing passage (141-8), a sublime location.

⁵⁴ For Romantic uses of the eagle analogy, see my discussion of 'Memorabilia' in Chapter VI.1.

doubtful. Through climbing up the beanstalk, Jack does not gain a superior perspective on his own world but enters a wholly different, fantastic country. When the giant has discovered the intruder's theft of his treasure, Jack has to flee from the cloud country. Once he has reached the ground, he cuts the beanstalks to prevent the giant from following him and thus deprives himself of the opportunity of returning to the cloud country. The analogy with the nursery tale character on the one hand humorously underlines the poet's self-conceptualisation as the reader's guide to a different universe, but on the other hand, after his previous alignment with the divinely guided prophet Elisha, it also weakens his assertion that he offers serious insights.

The same ambiguity can be found in the speaker's second address to the 'British Public'. Casting an ironic look back at his unsuccessful earlier work, he explains that he used to write for a select audience that could appreciate his hermetic style, even if this meant writing only for himself. He takes up an allusion to Habakkuk ii, 2, which had been evoked in two reviews which explained Browning's lack of success with his contemporaries' habit of reading cursorily like a person 'on the run'.⁵⁵ He retorts that he is now

Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
Than erst when 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, 1381-5)

However, the seriousness of this declaration that he makes a greater effort to write more easily accessible poetry for the general public is called into doubt by the repetition of 'Perchance' at the beginning of lines 1381 and 1383. Moreover, this verse paragraph which announces Browning's transition to a clearer style is couched in a complex, interrupted syntax, which stretches over all of its eleven lines, and is obscured by the variations of the Habakkuk verse. Its enunciation is certainly not an example of the new clarity the enounced advocates. This makes the passage yet another instance of the author's distance from his speaker and his defiance of the values of the common reader.

⁵⁵ These are Gerald Massey's retrospective consideration of Browning's work in the *North British Review* 34 (1861), p. 184 (quoted in Erickson 192) and Sir J. Skelton's review of the *Selections in Frazer's Magazine* of February 1863 (Litzinger and Smalley 207).

Finally, like the mountain guide passage, the closing invocation of the muse, which presents EBB as a model subjective poet, is another concession to Romantic poetics (see Chapter II.4). The poet's first monologue thus closes on a self-image which is diametrically opposed to the objective craftsman and historian at its beginning. This does not mean that the conflict in his self-conceptualisation is resolved in favour of subjectivity. Between the mountain guide passage and the invocation intervenes the colour wheel metaphor, which expounds Browning's objectifying multiperspectivism (see Chapter V.2.3.1).

V.2.3. General Poetics

So far the analysis of the poet's second order observation of his creative process has shown that he is in fact less innovative and less independent of the Romantic tradition than his ring and resuscitation metaphors claim at first sight. In this part, I want to inquire whether this conflict can also be traced in his general poetics. Before analysing his statements on the epistemological function of art, I will first return to the discussion of multiperspectivism as an indicator of the speaker's and the author's modernity.

V.2.3.1. The Impossibility of Observing the World: Multiperspectivism and Relativism

It is clear from the many metaphorical analogies for the disappearance of facts over time unless fiction halts this process (see Chapter V.2.2.2) that the speaker presupposes the existence and accessibility of truth, even though he is aware of its precariousness. The metaphor of the colour wheel, which condemns the arbitrary choice of a single perspective – ‘choosing which one aspect of the year / Suited mood best’ (I, 1349-50) – states that multiperspectivism is a way to truth. The spinning wheel (i.e. the animating power of the poet’s imagination) combines the variety of the colour facets (the speakers’ different perspectives) into the ‘eventual unity’ (I, 1363) of the colour white (truth).⁵⁶ White light represents objectivity because, unlike the colours of the spectrum which stand for the colouring of subjective perception, it has no colour and is yet constituted by a combination of all other colours. The association of the colour white with the innocent Pompilia throughout the poem is an indication of the nature of the objective truth which the poet believes himself to perceive.⁵⁷ In this surprising way Browning finally seems to achieve what he aspired to in the courtship correspondence, when 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: but I am going to try..’ (13 January 1845, *Corr.* 10: 22).

The following comparison with the device which John Killham has identified as an electric egg (167 and 174-5) focuses on the divergence of perspectives. Taking the stance of a second order observer, the poet examines how first order observers perceive the world. He comes to the conclusion that already a minute change in point

⁵⁶ Browning revises Shelley’s view that colours and white are diametrically opposed. In ‘Adonais’, Shelley writes:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. (462-4)

An indication that Browning had ‘Adonais’ in mind is his quotation of Shelley’s phrase ‘the revolving year’ from ‘Adonais’ 155 and 472 in *R&B* I, 1361.

⁵⁷ See Christopher Katope’s ‘Patterns of Imagery in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*’ (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Vanderbilt University 1954), 22ff., quoted by Khattab (140).

of view may turn an observation into its very opposite, so that white becomes black and good becomes bad:

Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
Shifted a hair's-breadth shoots you dark for bright,
Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so
Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.
Once set such orbs, – white styled, black stigmatized, –
A-rolling, see them once on the other side
Your good men and your bad men every one,
From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux [sic],
Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names. (I, 1367-78)

The main intention of the speaker at this point is to refer to the change of perspectives in order to discredit the apparently honourable Count Guido, whose villainy is compared to that of the false (French 'faux') leader of the gunpowder plot. On the level of the enunciation, however, this passage can be read as implying a radical relativism and the general negation of the possibility of objective observation. The sentence 'Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names' does not only mean that the judgement concerning many people must be revised. It also signifies that there can be no correct evaluation of a person because the stance of any observer can be altered endlessly, just as there is an endless number of perspectives on the rolling 'orbs'. Any 'sentence absolute' is therefore but an illusion. Hence a line of argument which began as an elaboration of the colour wheel metaphor, postulating the possibility to reconcile all perspectives in one absolute, neutral point of view, gets inadvertently out of the speaker's control. At the end of the paragraph, he is not able to return to his ideal of the 'eventual unity' proclaimed in line 1363. He finds himself entrapped in a contradiction, but is unable to verbalise this in the enounced without abandoning his belief in the absolute perspective. The only possible way of escape is to break off the train of thought.

Similarly, although the enounced of the ring metaphor affirms that truth can be revealed through multiperspectivism, its implications in the enunciation might also suggest the negation of the notions of absolute truth and objective point of view, which in Luhmann's view characterises modernity and lead to the focus on second instead of first order observation (*Beobachtungen* 44). The ring's shape is a perfect illustration of

Jacques Derrida's concept of the metaphysics of presence. Traditional epistemology would presuppose that absolute truth, which is unattainable for the individual speakers, is situated within the hollow centre of the ring of the monologues. According to Derrida, the assumption of the presence of the centre of a structure is but a practical postulate, a conceptual necessity which permits us to comprehend the structurality of the structure (409). Paradoxically, the centre constitutes the very element within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality. It is both within the structure and outside it, just as the hollow is situated in the middle of the ring and yet does not belong to the totality of the structure (410). In order to lay claim to the absolute perspective, the poet's point of view would thus have to be at the centre of the ring. But instead, their numbering integrates his monologues into the ring of speakers, situating him on a level with their subjective, limited viewpoints.⁵⁸

The poet's return to the ring metaphor in the first line of Book XII in the subjunctive clause 'Here were the end, had anything an end'⁵⁹ is another indirect admission of the impossibility of attaining a synthesis after having heard a limited number of speakers. The hasty addition of four further voices in an effort to include all views of the story which are available in the *OYB* makes Book XII 'a sort of mad scramble for additional perspectives' (Menaghan 271; cf. Slinn *Discourse* 146). But these extra speakers do not facilitate the positive formulation of truth. On the contrary, their discrepant perspectives distort truth more and more and push it even further out of reach. In the case of Archangelis, we even see the same speaker taking two different points of view, depending on whether he addresses his associate in an official letter which will be shown to the Franceschini family or whether he expresses his true thoughts in a private postscript. Whereas in Books II-XI blind spots are suggested in the enunciation through internal contradictions or implications of the imagery, the letter writers in Book XII tell their addressees explicitly what they think the others' personal

⁵⁸ Cf. Browning's use of the metaphor of the ring of his characters and his awareness that he must situate himself outside it in one of his promises to EBB that he will write self-expressive poetry: 'I will do as you bid me, and.. say first I have some Romances and Lyrics, all dramatic, to dispatch, and *then*, I shall stoop of a sudden under and out of this dancing ring of men & women hand in hand, – and stand still awhile, should my eyes dazzle, – and when that's over, they will be gone and you will be there, *pas vrai?* – For, as I think I told you, I always shiver involuntarily when I look.. no, glance.. at this First Poem of mine to be – [...]' (26 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 98).

⁵⁹ This is another token of Browning's indebtedness to *Aurora Leigh*. Cf. EBB's opening line, 'Of writing many books there is no end', which is itself an echo of Ecclesiastes xii, 12.

interests and motivations are. In this way, even a superficial reading that only takes account of the enounced cannot fail to notice how biased the speakers are.

The clash between the trust in the absolute perspective in the enounced and the undermining of it in the enunciation of Books I and XII permits the reader to observe the poet as a consciousness at the threshold of a new epistemology. The enunciation indicates that he has nearly arrived at the acknowledgement of a modern relativism, but he is not yet able to deal with the important consequences which such a radical change of his world picture entails. Therefore this concept is not voiced, and the enounced still clings to the compromise of multiperspectivism and its possibility of a cumulative synthesis of all monologues, which constitute the absolute point of view.

Even the enunciation of the whole poem does not intimate that the multiplicity of points of view results in an utter lack of orientation. We are given the impression that the poet and, to a lesser extent, the Pope can approximate the truth of the events and their ethical implications, despite their subjectivity and their inability to understand Guido's experience of the world.⁶⁰ Significantly, these are the two speakers who use the method of collating points of view, and they are the only ones to formulate the principle of striving (I, 712-9; X, 1406-24 and 1431-4). The belief in the theoretical existence of truth is thereby not altogether abandoned, but truth is situated just so far beyond the human sphere that it remains practically out of reach. The only difference between this solution and genuine modern relativism lies in the psychological security offered by the familiar theoretical construct.

V.2.3.2. The Intransparency of Language and the Epistemological Function of Art

The impossibility of *observing* the world which we have discovered in relation to the principle of multiperspectivism corresponds to a parallel discussion of the deficiencies of language – the impossibility of *describing* the world – towards the end of Book I and in Book XII. In contrast to the reflections on multiperspectivism, the impossibility

⁶⁰ This limitation is stressed by the fact that the Pope's and the poet's monologues (Books X and XII) are juxtaposed with Guido's second monologue (Book XI).

of communicating truth is clearly expressed in the enounced. The poet teaches the British Public

This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind. (XII, 838-40)

In Book I, the question ‘For how else know we save by worth of word?’ (I, 837) comes already close to a negation of the autonomous existence of the world. As reality can only be realised through language, manipulations of this medium, such as the rhetoric of the lawyers – their ‘puissance of the tongue’ (I, 1118) – must be condemned. The poet and the lawyers themselves remind us that, like the change of one’s point view, language has the power to dissolve oppositions or to make them change sides:

And Language – ah, the gift of eloquence!
Language that goes, goes easy as a glove
O’er good and evil, smoothens both to one. (I, 1179-81)

The poet gives two reasons for the failure of everyday communication to convey truth, which are respectively indications of the impossibility of observing and of the impossibility of describing the world. Firstly, man has to realise that his ‘mate’ cannot seize an objectively existing truth external to his consciousness. Elaborating on the Psalms’ and Christ’s hermeneutic concern with the correct understanding of perceptions (Psalms cxi, 5-6; Mark viii, 18) in a humorous change of tone, he posits that the sense organs are no guarantee for comprehension: “[...] eyes hast thou yet art blind, / Thine ears are stuffed and stopped, despite their length [...]” (XII, 846-7). This states that the system of human consciousness has no direct access to its environment and can only construct its individual, subjective vision of the world (Luhmann *Kunst* 18). Since consciousness is a self-contained system, the perception of truth can never be transferred from one consciousness to another (Luhmann *Kunst* 20). In Book I, the poet already acknowledges that minds are mutually intransparent because ‘sense and sight’

([...] take at best imperfect cognizance,
Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
What mortal ever in entirety saw?) (I, 827-9)

So far, this is in accordance with John Locke's epistemology in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which posits that an addressee can never access the speaker's precise idea which is signified by the words he uses (405-6).⁶¹

But Browning goes beyond Locke, when in Book XII the speaker also blames the failure of communication on the instability of the medium of language. He states that during the process of transmission from sender to addressee, truth is converted into a lie, and that even the sender is unable to recognise his message once it has arrived at the addressee's end of the channel – a notion of the message as emancipated from the sender which is put forward by post-structuralism (e.g. Ricœur 90). The diagnosis of the problem already contains its solution:

[...] but here's the plague
That all this trouble comes of telling truth,
Which truth, by when it reaches him, looks false,
Seems to be just the thing it would supplant,
Nor recognizable by whom it left:
While falsehood would have done the work of truth. (XII, 852-57)

Truth can be revealed through falsehood. Since art – and poetry more than prose – is so obviously an artificial discourse which draws attention to its falsehood, it is the ideal medium for conveying truth (Slinn *Discourse* 147). In this way, the very characteristic of the work of art with which empiricism finds fault, the lack of a purely mimetic reference to an existent, external reality, turns out to be its asset. A sort of double negation permits the communication of truth: the artist converts factual truth into the lie of fiction, but as the sender's (the artist's) message has been turned upside down by the time it reaches the addressee (the reader), he can eventually recognise truth.

This revaluation of art exceeds in its apparent absurdity the arguments which Book I puts forward in defence of fiction, such as the refusal to separate means and ends by equating 'fact' with 'fiction which makes fact alive' (I, 705) or the declaration that man can only digest truth if it is diluted with the easily digestible milk of falsehood (I, 830-2). In Book I, the speaker still endorses the prevalent ideology of his period,

⁶¹ On the influence of Locke's theory of language on Browning, cf. Hair (*Language* 12ff.).

which posits the two traditional oppositions of fact / fiction and everyday discourse / aesthetic discourse, according to which fact and everyday communication are the norm, whereas fiction and aesthetic discourse are deviant and inferior alternatives. Book XII inverts these hierarchies, so that literature no longer appears as a parasitic special case of language. On the contrary, what is generally denigrated as ‘fictional reality’ and ‘misrepresentation’ (Culler 181) now expresses truth.

In order to resolve the paradox, the speaker is anxious to present the epistemological agency of art as a more complex process. The enjambement emphasises that art operates by indirect means:

But Art, – wherein man nowise speaks to men,
Only to mankind,⁶² – Art may tell a truth
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,
Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word. (XII, 858-61)

‘Obliquely’ cannot simply refer to multiperspectivism, as some critics claim. This technique is only applied in *R&B*, whereas the use of the capital in ‘Art’ indicates that the passage does not refer to a single work but to all art, or at least to Browning’s ideal of poetry in general. For Slinn, the explanation of ‘Obliquely’ lies in the parenthesis: unlike ordinary communication, art is not designed for specific addressees, but is available to all men. It therefore avoids the complications of everyday discourse (‘the mediate word’) and gives access to a pre-verbal essence (‘the thought’; *Discourse* 147). I agree that the special status of literary discourse is a factor, but poetry does of course also use ‘the mediate word’. I would argue that Browning’s specific concept of art is not expressed in the parenthesis but in the elliptical clause which defines ‘Obliquely’: art does not spell out truth in the enounced (‘the mediate word’) but leads the reader to discover ideas for himself – just as in the dramatic monologue the reader must look beyond the words of the monologist. This reading with its emphasis on the activating effect on the reader is more in line with the following statement that art can

⁶² This may be an allusion to Wordsworth’s definition of the poet as ‘a man speaking to men’ (*Lyrical Ballads* 255).

twice show truth,
 Beyond mere imagery on the wall, –
 So, note by note, bring music from your mind,
 Deeper than e'en Beethoven dived, –
 So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,
 Suffice the eye and save the soul beside. (XII, 862-7)

Art is not only an imaginative mimesis of events ('mere imagery'). It also releases something inherent in the recipient's mind and awakens the religious or metaphysical truths which the descendants of Romantic aesthetics attribute to poetry. This statement bears some resemblance to John Stuart Mill's definition of two kinds of truth in his 'Thoughts on Poetry': 'The truth of poetry is to paint the human soul truly: the truth of fiction is to give a true picture of life' (346). Since Browning's objective poetry, including *R&B*, generally falls into the category of 'fiction [which] give[s] a true picture of life', he can lay claim to combining both truths. The way Browning describes this second, poetic kind of truth recalls Mill's description of poetry as 'the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of human emotion' (345), although Mill does not focus on the effect on the reader. Like Hazlitt (5: 12-13) or Keble (1: 47-8), Mill also draws the Romantic analogy between the expression of passion in poetry and what he calls '[p]urely pathetic music' (350). He cites Beethoven as an example of this mode, and the 1889 reading of line 865, 'Deeper than ever e'en Beethoven dived, –', amended from 'Deeper than ever the Andante dived, –' in the first edition, suggests that Browning here has the same kind of music in mind.

Browning's assumption that poetry contributes to the individual's salvation agrees with Keble's opinion expounded in the last of his *Lectures on Poetry* that 'real Religion is in striking accord with true poetry' (2: 473) and the view put forward in his dedication to Wordsworth that poetry is ideally a medium of 'high and sacred truth'. It also anticipates Arnold's idea of literature as taking over the function of religion in 'The Study of Poetry' of 1880 (9: 161-2). The speaker's transfer of the authority of religion to art is easy to observe because his linguistic theory is a variation of that voiced by the Pope and Fra Celestino. The Pope considers lying to be an integral aspect of the human condition. Man is 'subject to a curse' (X, 351) because he 'must tell his mate / Of you, me and himself, knowing he lies, / Knowing his fellow knows the same' (X, 367-9). Only God, the transcendent observer, who is safely situated outside the

realm of human discourse, achieves the ideal unity of language and truth: 'He, the Truth, is, too, / The Word' (X, 376-7).⁶³ This view is even more succinctly expressed in Fra Celestino's quotation from Romans iii, 4, "'God is true / And every man a liar'" (XII, 600-1), which he cites to justify the rejection of Guido's plea for pardon by the Pope, God's representative on earth.

Considered in their entirety, the speaker's poetics thus turn out to be contradictory. The enunciation suggests that he has an intimation of the impossibility of objective observation. In the enounced, he advocates an empiricist definition of truth, sketches out a progressive model of communication which displays his awareness of the problems in mediating thought, and he designs the ring and resuscitation metaphors as counter-models to the Romantic concept of godlike creativity. All this seems to indicate that he is freeing himself from the influence of Romantic aesthetics and is moving towards a more modern and relativistic world view. However, in his self-portrayal the speaker at times still draws on the Romantic stereotype of the poet as seer (see Chapters V.2.2.1-3), and the closing passage of the poem reveals that the ultimate purpose of all these arguments is to support a concept of poetry which re-establishes its function as a mediator of truth. He even goes beyond Romanticism by elevating art to a surrogate religion.

At least the claim 'That Art remains the one way possible / Of speaking truth' (XII, 843-4) is attenuated by the caveat 'to mouths like mine, at least' (XII, 844). The speaker thus calls into question the general validity of these poetics by presenting them as the only solution he can find for himself. This is possibly a token in the enounced of Browning's awareness that he is not yet capable of responding to his relativistic perception of the world with a radically new poetry which corresponds to this new experience.

V.2.4. The Third Order Observation: The Stance of the Implied Author

We finally have to determine on the level of third order observation whether the enunciation agrees with the enounced of the closing passage. In this case the speaker

⁶³ On the privileged point of view of the Judaeo-Christian God, cf. Luhmann *Beobachtungen* 106ff.

'Browning' would become a serious mouthpiece of his author, and the incongruities in his poetics would also be the author's blind spots. Among the interpretations which assume a separation of Browning into author and speaker, only Dupras calls the speaker's poetics a 'counterfeit poetics' designed to make the audience aware of its preconceptions about poetry (31). Sullivan (172) and Menaghan (274) agree with the majority of critics and read the final lines of Book XII as the author's serious statement. This attribution seems to be supported by Browning's readiness to be more outspoken in his later works, as in the thin disguise of Ferishtah or *in propria persona* in the *Parleyings*. Thompson ('Authorial Detachment' 675) and Shaw (*Dialectical Temper* 252) argue that, as in the case of the two complementary monologues by Guido, there is a discrepancy between Books I and XII: Book I is spoken by a subjective Browning with a limited perspective, whereas Book XII with its relatively few value judgements is the utterance of the objective author. Yet many verbal echoes of Book I in Book XII emphasise that the speaker's attitude has not really evolved and that at the end of his ring of monologues, of which he is a part, he returns to his starting-point.⁶⁴

V.2.4.1. Which Truth Does Art Tell?

To determine the author's stance, we first have to establish the substance of the truth which the work of art *R&B* tells. On the surface, the purpose of the poem seems to be to reconstruct the events of the Roman murder story and to arrive at the right moral judgement of the characters. According to the poet's narrations of the story in Book I, the truth would then be the destruction of the innocent Pompilia by Guido, the incarnation of evil. But section V.2.1 has shown this interpretation to be less an objective insight than a view determined by the speaker's individual perspective. Moreover, if this was the all-important truth, the sentence 'Art may tell a truth / Obliquely' (XII, 859-60) would be strictly speaking wrong. The poet-speaker does not tell his interpretation of the story obliquely but forces it on us directly in an authoritative manner. If this were the author's meaning, he would either really consider

⁶⁴ The ambiguous value of the circle is already alluded to in 'Old Pictures in Florence' (132-6) in the anecdote about Giotto's drawing of a perfect circle, which is less valuable than the unfinished campanile and corresponds to "O!", i.e. zero.

the speaker's truth-telling as oblique or he would be blind to the fact that the speaker does not practise what he preaches.⁶⁵

An alternative solution is that the obliquely told truth does not concern the facts of the story or their moral evaluation and is not to be found in the straightforward statements in the poet's enounced. Truth would thus not be defined by the empirical dichotomy of right / wrong or the moral code good / evil, which should after the functional differentiation of society no longer be the dominant categories for the art system. Instead, it can lie in the impossibility of absolute observation, illustrated by the variety of subjective perspectives in the poem and the ineffectual striving of each speaker to transcend his point of view. This truth is not imparted through the 'mediate word' (XII, 861), i.e. it is never spelled out in the text, but emerges 'obliquely' from the accumulation of all monologues. This interpretation is not opposed to the claim that the poem may 'save the soul'. Hair points out the similarity between *R&B* and the prototype of the Protestant conversion narrative, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which also opens on a man reading a book (*Language* 175). The Bible spurs Christian to go on a quest for his salvation, whereas Browning embarks on a quest for meaning in writing *R&B*, a quest which the reader has to reduplicate in reading the poem. Hair argues that, according to Browning's religiously grounded faith in the value of striving, the poet's and the reader's striving for meaning is a soul-saving exercise (*ibid.*). This definition of truth would also explain the poet's use of the indefinite article 'a truth', which contrasts with the Pope's capitalised 'the Truth'. It intimates that, unlike the Pope, the poet-speaker at least does not take the existence of an absolute, monolithic truth for granted. If the absence of absolute truth and objective observation is the truth the poem teaches, this means that the poet-speaker also has a limited perspective.

Peckham suggests that Browning's realisation of the poet's biased perspective might have been influenced by a contemporary debate among historians, which could hardly have escaped the attention of someone with his great interest in historiography ('Historiography'). In his lecture 'The Science of History', given in 1864 and published in 1867, James Anthony Froude, a prominent follower of the von Ranke school, discussed not only the personal interests and limitations of the authors of primary

⁶⁵ For a similar discrepancy between the speaker's theory and practice, see 'Transcendentalism' in Chapter VI.2.

sources but also the bias of the historiographer (*ibid.* 255). This self-reflexivity widens the gap between the new historians and the older generation of Carlyle, Michelet and Macaulay, who did not consider their own process of observation as problematic. Browning's stance in the dramatic monologues which precede *R&B* corresponds to the attitude of the older generation of historiographers (*ibid.* 252). The exclusion of the author's voice from the text deflects attention from his point of view and suggests that the reader can, with the help of the author, become an absolute observer of the monologist. It is not surprising if in the first work since *Paracelsus* in which he made a point of his imitation of the research of a historian and referred to his sources, Browning applied the self-conscious reflections of the discipline which he was emulating to his own art.⁶⁶ Through integrating the poet into his fiction for the first time since *Sordello*, confronting him with a multiplicity of divergent perspectives and indicating his personal biases, *R&B* exposes the full extent of the poet's dilemma, which can only confirm that even he can neither grasp nor mediate an objective truth.

V.2.4.2. Romantic Irony

The arguments put forward in the previous section suggest that Browning is aware that the general impossibility of absolute observation also includes him in the role of the author. Yet while the enunciation exposes the poet-speaker's biased view of the story, the passages on poetics are not discredited other than through the inconsistent return to Romantic poetics. The lack of a clear distance between enounced and enunciation in the closing passage intimates that the author wants to believe that art is a privileged discourse which can make some sense of the puzzling multiplicity of subjective views – although, as I have just argued, less in the apparent sense of spelling out factual or moral truths, than in considering the striving for meaning as a way to salvation. This unresolved conflict between, on the one hand, the awareness of the world's unmanageable complexity, and, on the other, the desire to organise it into a purposeful

⁶⁶ Between the two poems, Browning had undertaken some historical research for *Strafford* and *Sordello* but had not made his method a subject in the text. However, a germ of Browning's reflection on the historiographer's motivations for writing and his readiness to bend the facts can be found in *Sordello* in the reference to the monk who is bored with monastic life, decides to write a secular chronicle and blots out the section in the monastery's charter which forbids this (I, 298-308).

order, is the central paradox of Romantic Irony. I want to argue in this section that it is the mode of Romantic Irony which enables the author to remain in control of his internal contradictions and to make them accessible to the reader in a way which displays his self-consciousness in a favourable light.

A brief look at some aspects of the poem reveals the text as a whole to be an exemplum of Romantic Irony.⁶⁷ Thanks to the method of multiperspectivism, the poem corresponds to Schlegel's idea of '*progressive Universalpoesie*' ('Athenäum' frag. 116), which reflects the plenitude of the era. The multiplicity of idiosyncratic voices and the mixture of prosaic and lyrical passages make it an arabesque of various styles and discourses (*ibid.*). Moreover, the text combines different genres (see Chapter V.2.1.3), especially that of the novel, which is the exemplary genre of Romantic Irony. The open-ended structure of Book XII, in which different points of view succeed each other more rapidly, illustrates the impossibility of being and the state of eternal *becoming* of truth. The conflict of *being* and *becoming*, finite and infinite, can be seen both in the macrostructure and the microstructure of the text: whereas the accumulation of speakers constantly defers a conclusion, the method of retrospective narration derives from the speakers' desire to attribute meaning (Slinn *Discourse* 139); and the frequency of paradoxes, such as the poet's twisting of the definitions of fact and fiction, is the most concise illustration of the possibility of holding two opposed opinions at the same time (Schlegel 'Lyceum' frag. 48).

As in *Sordello*, the *transcendental buffoonery* of the Romantic ironist is articulated through the relation of the enounced and the enunciation of the poet-speaker's utterance. In the discussion of language, the enounced already displays an inkling of the necessity and impossibility of complete communication (Schlegel 'Lyceum' frag. 108). It also shows central tensions of Romantic Irony through the oscillation between the opposed principles of subjective and objective poetry, Romantic absolutism and the empiricist valuing of fact, in the description of the poet's creative process.⁶⁸ The speaker is initially fascinated by the chaos of the world, as it manifests

⁶⁷ Patricia Rigg's book-length study on Romantic Irony in *R&B* focuses so exclusively on the indeterminacy of truth that it does not pick up most of these obvious characteristics. In her chapter on the poet-speaker, she has disappointingly little to say about the character as an ironist.

⁶⁸ D. C. Muecke defines Romantic Irony as 'literature in which there is a constant dialectic interplay of objectivity and subjectivity' (78).

itself in the picturesque confusion of the flea market, but his retrospective description of it reveals a symbolic ordering, for instance in the position of the *OYB* as symmetrically flanked by examples of the literary genres and ideological positions which the poem is going to reject (I, 75-81). Similarly, the speaker is attracted by the heterogeneity of the documents in the *OYB*, but the enunciation reveals his efforts to fit this complexity into literary and moral patterns. The ring symbol unites the infinity of a circle without beginning or end with the finite form which encloses a centre. The enounced stresses the finite aspect of the ring, which arrests the ephemeral spark of truth in the timeless form of the work of art. Influenced by the public's taste, the speaker is so intent on compressing the complexity of his creative act into a finite form that he simplifies the ring metaphor.

In another respect, though, the speaker is all too eager to embrace the infinite. Although his modest resuscitation poetics demonstrate the recognition of his inferiority to the divine creator, the enunciation discloses through his choice of imagery his striving for divine creativity. The insistence on his creative powers and his didactic guidance of the reader as well as the final statement on poetics make this explicit in the enounced. Unable to take into consideration the limitations of his own point of view, he cannot keep the balance of an undecided *hovering* and in the enounced finally succumbs to the principle of *self-creation*, in which the artist celebrates his creativity.

In exposing the speaker's subjective construction of the world, the enunciation provides the counterweight of *self-destruction*, in which the artist displays a sceptical awareness of his human limitations. The many indications of the impossibility of complete observation in the enunciation bear witness to a greater readiness to confront a relativist world picture than the enounced. The enunciation makes us doubt the reliability of the poet-speaker in various places, but he is never fully undermined. This impossibility of firmly attributing certain ideas voiced in the enounced to the author shows him to be a Romantic ironist, who can never be pinned down to a fixed point of view. Protected by the speaker's *persona*, he can indulge in his tendency to impose his moral and biographical patterns on his material and distance himself from it; he can admit his desire for popularity and satirise it; he can try to cater for the taste of a wider audience in the enounced and at the same time write for a more sophisticated reader in the enunciation; he can situate himself within two opposed epistemological frameworks

– Romanticism and empiricism – but if attacked for being either or both at the same time, he can point to his distance to the speaker; he can present his innovative poetics and at the same time show their origins and disadvantages, and thus embody Schlegel's paradoxical ideal of having a system and at the same time not having one ('Athenäum' frag. 53). As Menaghan remarks, 'we cannot ask Browning to be consistent in a poem which demonstrates the impossibility of being so' (269).

V.2.5. The Apex of Browning's Modernity

R&B takes the shift to functional differentiation and the principle of second order observation to its furthest point in Browning's career. The poem is a more radical development of the epistemological interest of the dramatic monologue and the psychological novel in that it projects the problems of second order observation simultaneously on a horizontal and a vertical axis: multiperspectivism exposes the determinants of point of view in the intradiegetic speakers, who are all situated on the same narrative level, whereas Books I and XII give an insight into the cognitive process and perspective of the superior consciousness of the poet and encourage the reader to apply the same reflections to himself. This means that the poet-speaker, and more acutely, the author find themselves on the brink of radical relativism, facing their own limitations. Browning is surely ahead of his time in this realisation. Yet it would be asking too much if we expected him to relish the endless plurality engendered by the dissolution of absolute values in the way that postmodern texts do. Instead, he tries to make a virtue out of necessity and, in line with his religious and aesthetic belief in the incomplete, declares the striving for meaning to be a soul-saving activity. The Romantic Irony in the text articulates his hesitation between the acceptance of a new, disconcerting world picture and the desire to attain some stable meaning.

In the works following *R&B*, we see Browning recoiling from the consequences of this discovery. Like *R&B*, his next publication, *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871), looks back at historical events and contains extended commentaries on poetics, but he bypasses the problem of the author's biased perspective by making the fictional Balaustion his mouthpiece. Peckham, who considers the undermining of the author's point of view a result of Browning's imitation of the historian's method, suggests that

his general avoidance of multiperspectivism and historical subjects in favour of contemporary themes is his way of shunning the consequences of the self-questioning raised by *R&B* ('Historiography' 256).

Although valid in general, Peckham's view disregards the claim to factual accuracy in Browning's next narrative poem *in propria persona*, *RCNCC*. It is correct, however, that *RCNCC* steers clear of seriously undermining the perspective of the author. Instead, it amplifies two other aspects already present in *R&B*: Browning's self-observation as a participant in the self-regulated art system and his criticism of literary conventions. After he has in *R&B* foregrounded his realisation that the stance of the mid-nineteenth-century poet depends more than ever on his interaction with the 'British Public', *RCNCC* addresses in a more dramatic way the necessity to confront his public image as man and poet and his need to define himself in relation to his audience and its expectations. There are already many implicit points of criticism with reference to the realist tradition in *R&B*, e.g. the undermining of the realists' claim to objective mimesis, historical accuracy and their postulate of the transparency of the medium of language. *RCNCC* gives more space to the observation of these issues and also offers a more specific confrontation with realism's direct heir, naturalism.

V.3. *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*

R&B already accords great importance to the observation of the poet-speaker, who opens and closes the ring of monologues, but in *RCNCC* the entire poem is the monologue of a speaker who is unmistakably 'Browning' during his 1872 summer holiday in Saint Aubin in Normandy. DeVane's remark 'The poem loses in intensity because it is narrative instead of dramatic monologue' (*Handbook* 374) is a characteristic misjudgement of the poem. DeVane fails to see that – in contrast to the thematically similar *Inn Album* – the mediating consciousness of the narrator as it appears in the enunciation, and not the story in the enounced, is the true focus. The dramatic presentation of the act of narration makes the reader a spectator of the stages in the creation of the narrative. Léonce Miranda's soliloquy before his jump from the Belvedere and the reactions of Clara and his cousins present the result of this creative process: dramatic monologues and a multiperspectivism reminiscent of *R&B*.

A testimony by Edmund Gosse indicates how close the spontaneous narration and surprising interpretation of the given facts in *RCNCC* comes to the real Browning in conversation. Gosse recalls a leisurely dialogue in June 1889, in the course of which Browning within five minutes sketched out a poem from a remembered anecdote about an Italian artist. While recounting the story

Mr. Browning suddenly reflected that there was, as he said, ‘stuff for a poem’ in that story, and immediately with extreme vivacity began to sketch the form it should take, the suppression of what features and the substitution of what others were needful; and finally suggested the non-obvious or inverted moral of the whole [...] (86)

Similarly, in her *Records of Tennyson, Ruskin, and Browning*, Anne Ritchie, née Thackeray, Browning’s interlocutor in the poem, reports how he came up with an anecdote which was only very remotely related to an event which occurred in the course of a dinner party (216-17).

In the ample space that is given to the narrator’s interventions during his narration, Browning draws a humorous self-portrait of his public image in the 1870s. He appears as his contemporaries describe him: verbose, vigorous, versatile, full of anecdotes, gallant with ladies, yet ‘agreeably monopoliz[ing]’ the conversation⁶⁹ and even ‘tyranniz[ing]’ his ‘victims’, i.e. his listeners (Gosse 82). Especially the rambling Part I with its extravagant ideas and imagery seems to be Browning’s deliberate *autopastiche* of his reputation in London society. It takes the narrator 1150 lines, over one fourth of the poem, before he finally embarks upon the narrative – at which point he has already given away his evaluation and the moral of the story. He only tells Miranda’s story as a case in point to support his argument concerning the presence of ‘red’, or evil, in peaceful Normandy, which is itself not a serious contention. Indeed, he only contradicts Miss Thackeray for the sake of pursuing a jocular debate during their walk. His utterance is interspersed with imperatives and purely phatic remarks, such as ‘Street – you know the name’ (2685) or ‘whom you know’ (2723), which call for the attention, sympathy and complicity of his listener, who is flatteringly and self-consciously apostrophised: ‘Fair friend, – who listen and let talk, alas!’ (2011) Miss Thackeray’s silence is more than a generic requirement of the dramatic monologue.

⁶⁹ Edward March Wheelwright quoted by StGeorge (46). For a collection of contemporaries’ comments, see StGeorge (Chapter 2).

According to E. A. W. StGeorge, it illustrates Browning's bad habit of dominating the conversation, 'his unwillingness to relinquish the lead in conversation, his readiness to overtalk interruptions' (68). In this respect, he is not that different from his rather unappealing but eloquent character Don Juan in *Fifine at the Fair*, who is also presented during a walk at the French seaside with a female silent interlocutor whom he very obviously patronises.

The presence of Miss Thackeray is not only an occasion for characterising Browning the social man. Through his comparison of *RCNCC* with her novels, Malcolm Hicks has shown that the poem acts as Browning's surreptitious criticism of her naively optimistic world view and the trivial literary convention which she exemplifies.⁷⁰ This criticism is disguised by the complimentary allusions to her published novels and by the epilogue, which calls her projected novel about Normandy a 'white blaze', humbly preceded by the 'ruddy herald-star' (4242) of Browning's poem. But one of the narrator's first humorous self-references, in which he awkwardly 'Trespassed upon [her] flounce' (13), seems to excuse in advance the veiled attack that is to follow. Hicks argues that the character of Miranda satirically exaggerates the antiquated traditionalism and pure devotion of the heroines of Miss Thackeray's *Old Kensington* and *The Village on the Cliff*, which has the same setting as *RCNCC*. In Hicks's view, Miranda's death, which is brought about by his naïve faith that the Virgin will carry his body from the Belvedere to the church of La Ravissante, 'compels Anne [Thackeray] to face [the] abject failure' of her nostalgia for the past (40). The narrator's references to what she is saying at first sight give the impression of a true dialogue, but instead of letting her speak for herself, he devises her discourse for her. The naïve views he attributes to her and the manner in which he lets her express them show Browning employing the same strategy of undermining his opponent through an unfavourable portrayal of their discourse which has been analysed in Chapter IV. His criticism of her is most obvious in the heavily ironised dissertation on white nightcaps in lines 194-243, which is according to Charlotte Watkins a parody of the already mock-

⁷⁰ The low opinion Browning had of Miss Thackeray's writing is apparent in a letter to Isa Blagden, which declares one of her novels to be 'poorer than the poorest of Miss Mitford's sketches! I cannot conceive of anybody, acknowledged intelligent, writing worse' (McAleer *Blagden* 329).

heroic description of the sofa in William Cowper's *The Task* ('*RCNCC* and Carlyle' 362).

V.3.1. The Critical Observation of the Narrator's Realist-Naturalist Method

In contrast, the narrator's 'red cotton night-cap' is inspired by a scene from Carlyle's *French Revolution* – paraphrased in lines 308-14 – in which it is a serious metonymy for historical change. Watkins sees other evidence of Carlyle's influence in the poem's imagery, methodology and underlying assumptions. Yet considering all literary aspects in relation to Carlyle means seeking both too close and too far. On the one hand, as far as the constant references to the two symbolically charged metaphors of the nightcap and of turf and tower are concerned, it suffices to see them as a parodic exaggeration of Browning's own use of the device in *R&B*. On the other hand, the guiding principles of the narration are not specific only to Carlyle but are – as Roy Gridley argues (281-3) – the general rules of French realism, to whose more systematic and scientific method *RCNCC* is more akin than to British realism,⁷¹ and of the rising movement of naturalism, realism's more radical heir. Browning's recourse to elements of both movements is not surprising in view of the fact that the Brownings had a keen interest in French contemporary literature. Browning's own tendency towards the more disturbing grotesqueness of naturalism had already been pointed out in Milsand's review of *Men and Women* in the *Revue contemporaine*, in which he warned his friend of the dangers of exaggerating realist expression which leads to the grotesque (543).⁷²

RCNCC not only takes the naturalist ugly subject matter and language to an extreme; it also observes a realist author as he transforms a *fait divers* into a coherent narrative:⁷³ he draws on the public evidence of newspaper articles and the court proceedings, quotes witnesses' testimonies (2041-63), the verdict (4165-4208) and Miranda's letter to his brother (1354-5; 1425-33); and he complements his research by

⁷¹ See Kendrick's 'Facts and Figures', though, which argues that *RCNCC* is, from the point of view of subject matter, a verse application of the British sensational novel (348ff.).

⁷² Milsand's article is the point of departure for the critical discussion of the grotesque element in Browning by Walter Bagehot ('Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning'), George Santayana ('The Poetry of Barbarism') and Isobel Armstrong (*Victorian Poetry* Chapter 11).

⁷³ Cf. stanza xviii of *The Two Poets of Croisic*, which states that 'Anywhere serves' to 'find the story of our race', and thereby spells out the irrelevance of subject matter for the realist author.

personal investigations in the region, which enable him to disprove the lawyer's claim that there are shrines on the way from Clairvaux to La Ravissante (3180-2). He also emphasises the insignificant physical appearance of Clara de Millefleurs, whom Miranda finds so beautiful, as a 'blank! / I never saw what I could less describe' (846-7). In this indifference to his characters and his meticulous personal research, he emulates Flaubert. For a novel like *Madame Bovary* – 'papa's favourite book' in January 1859 according to Browning's son –⁷⁴ Flaubert made 'research trips' and consulted scientific documents, yet at the same time proclaimed how bored he was with his story and protagonist. In his application of a pseudo-scientific method of analysis, which is apparent in the imagery taken from biology, physics and medicine pointed out by Gridley (278-82), Browning's narrator comes closer to Emile Zola. And like Hippolyte Taine, who had such a great influence on Zola, the narrator explains the actions of his hero as the results of the influence of his heredity, environment and historical moment.⁷⁵

Gridley closes his brief analysis of the poem's relation to the naturalist movement by remarking that through the obtrusive narrator who 'mocks the naturalistic methodology he seems to pursue' (282) and his resistance to the naturalists' materialism, 'Browning places himself at one remove from – or beyond naturalism' (283). I believe that Browning's eclectic use of realist and naturalist elements in RCNCC deserves a more detailed analysis. The for both realism and naturalism incongruous inclusion of himself as an intrusive narrator in a dramatic situation is a clue that, as in the case of the portrayal of Miss Thackeray and Browning the conversationalist in Part I, the poem does not present his literary self without a critical second order observation. The poem thereby continues the scrutiny of his individual application of the realist convention to his poetry in *R&B*. If *R&B* is a rewriting of *Sordello*, RCNCC can be seen as a rewriting of both *Sordello* and *R&B*. It resembles the latter in the nature of its source material and method, but the formal set-up with 'Browning' as narrator throughout the text is a reprise of the more visible Romantic Irony in his self-portrayal in *Sordello*. The synthesis of the other two narrative poems

⁷⁴ Letter from EBB to Isa Blagden, 7 January 1859 (Kenyon *Letters of EBB* 304).

⁷⁵ According to Gridley, there is no proof, but it is unlikely that Browning had not read Taine and Zola (281). Cf. Brendan Kenny's study of the poem as a critical portrayal of the religious and social climate in France in the 1870s, which, however, does not discuss the relation of the poem to the social criticism of the naturalist novels.

betokens a persistent conflict between the ideal of absolute objective self-effacement, towards which the narrator of *R&B* aspires and which he achieves in Books II-XI, and the desire to be acknowledged for his creativity, which is more prominent in *Sordello*. There are several internal contradictions in *RCNCC* which counteract the overall realist-naturalist method. They are partially due to problems inherent in realism and naturalism themselves, which Browning thus playfully points out, partially proof of Browning's disagreement with especially the naturalists' world view, and partially caused by the fact that the narrator uses his utterance to promote his self-conceptualisation as a creative artist and that the author uses it for his self-observation.

The realists' main defence of their manner of representation was their claim that their novels were media of contemporary social history and had a quasi-scientific, objective truth value (see Chapter V.2.1.1). In the same vein, Browning's epilogue proclaims to tell 'truth and nothing else' (4235). If he decided at the last moment to substitute the real names by fictional ones, this was – as he explains in his letter of 16 May 1889 to T. J. Nettleship (Hood 309) – with the conviction that he was 'telling the exact truth' and was therefore running the risk of a prosecution for libel. Yet the projected, but never published, 'Advertisement' to the poem, which is included in a letter to his publisher George Smith and gives a unique insight into Browning's authorial intention, proves he is aware that no objective truth but only public discourse is available to the poet:

Advertisement

I premise, and wish to have distinctly borne in mind by any reader of this poem, that it is no more nor less than a mere account treated poetically, of certain problematic facts taken just as I find them given, by parties to a dispute, in the published pleadings of their respective legal advocates and the formal decision of a Court of Law. Each and every such statement, therefore, affecting the conduct of either party, must be considered as depending absolutely upon public authority and pretending to no sort of guarantee for its truth obtainable from private sources of information – into none of which have I the will or power to inquire. My business confines itself to working a sum from arbitrary or imaginary figures: if these be correct, the result should follow as I give it – not otherwise. Nor would I attempt the working at all, had not the parties themselves begun by proposing the figures for examination. No fact has been purposely changed, although conversations, declared and described, could only be re-produced by a guess at something equivalent. Either party may – and one must have – exaggerated or extenuated or invented: my concern is exclusively with these presumable exaggerations and extenuations and inventions as they were presented to and decided upon by the Court of the County, as they exist in print, and as they may be procured by anybody.

R.B.

(8 March 1873, DeVane and Knickerbocker 211-12)

As in *R&B*, Browning acknowledges that the poem is based on clearly biased testimonies from a legal case, which guarantee no access to truth. Nevertheless, whereas the method of *R&B* is symbolised by the rotating colour wheel, which lets truth appear but makes it difficult for the observer to pin it down, the 'Advertisement' chooses the static metaphor of a sum, which implies more confidently that truth can be grasped. However, this is only possible because Browning declares that he has no 'will or power to inquire' into further sources of information and is happy to work from the assumption that the figures at his disposal 'be correct'. It is therefore clear that his aim in *RCNCC* is not to demonstrate the variety of all possible perspectives and the elusiveness of truth as in *R&B*, but to focus on how one single observer, a poet, makes sense of a limited set of data. Since the testimonies cannot be verified and the parties involved in the trial use language to manipulate the perception of events, Browning also takes the poetic licence to shape the testimonies into a literary text.

In contrast to the authorial voice in the 'Advertisement', the narrator in the enounced of the poem is reluctant to admit that he has recourse to poetic licence. He styles himself as a chronicler of events or even an eyewitness. But some equivocations can be found, for instance when he says about his hero: 'I quote / The words, I cannot give the smile' (2621-2). He thus pretends that Miranda's facial expression, which he cannot possibly have seen, surpasses his linguistic abilities. He is also untruthful when he claims to draw the anecdote about Luc de la Maison Rouge from a hitherto unidentified 'Cistercian monk I copy from' (3068) – although if the monk is an invention, the reader is very probably not able to detect this. The phrase 'I copy from' can either be interpreted as a reference to his writing-process by the author. It would then be the only moment in the 4229 lines before the epilogue at which the illusion of a spoken utterance is destroyed and Browning portrays himself as a realist *writer*. Or the pretence of copying a written document during a walk must be the narrator's effort to add authority to his argument at the cost of telling an obvious lie. To whichever textual level it is attributed, the false source alerts the reader who detects it to view the so-called factual evidence put forward by realists with a critical eye and to be aware of the writer's imaginative additions.

On other points, the narrator does not even pretend to follow the most common realist model. His extensive verdicts on the main characters in Part IV are clear

infringements of the principles of authorial detachment or Flaubertian *impassibilité*. Although he pretends to be impartial when he refuses to ‘throw the first stone’ (1755) at Clara, he is already in the first three parts quick to pass judgement even on marginal details of the story: he approves of Saint Eldogar and Vertgalant, while he condemns Sganarelle (1274ff.), or dismisses Clara’s false autobiographical narrative as ‘too true / A tale – perhaps I may subjoin, too trite!’ (1541-2). Mark Siegchrist considers the narrator’s lack of involvement with the story as a guarantee for his objectivity and a justification of his final judgement (142). It is certainly true that the narrator is not biased through any resemblance with his personal life as in *R&B*. Still, ironic comments early in the narrative and the persistent use of metaphor indicate how he is intent on fitting the facts into the mould of a story which denounces the pernicious influence of orthodox Catholicism and his immoral Parisian milieu on the susceptible Miranda. Of course, the utterance is not a novel but part of a conversation and contains personal interventions which would be edited out of a Flaubertian novel. It nevertheless serves as a reminder, firstly, that some realist authors like W. M. Thackeray, the father of Browning’s interlocutor, do not reflect on the contradiction between their claim to objectivity and their sometimes highly personal and subjective authorial intrusions, and secondly, that an author is never indifferent to his subject, especially not a naturalist who considers his text to illustrate a socio-psychological theory, as the narrator does here.

Ironically, the narrator’s application of the naturalists’ determinist theory comes to a conclusion which rejects their underlying ideological assumptions and thus turns their own method against them. His opposition to their radical materialism is already apparent in the refutation of Dr. Beaumont, the spokesman for scientific determinism, who denies the equal importance of soul and body and only believes in physical phenomena (2645-55). Given Browning’s Congregationalist upbringing, it is not surprising that the narrator believes in the duality of body and soul. Arguing for the importance of this concept for Browning’s faith and poetics, Hair (*Languages* 50-5) quotes a letter to Mrs FitzGerald in which Browning expresses his surprise that Schopenhauer considered himself the discoverer of a doctrine ‘which *I* had been persuaded of from my boyhood – and have based my whole life upon: – that the soul is above and *behind* the intellect which is merely its servant’ (28 August 1876, McAleer

FitzGerald 34). Hair also points out the express use of 'soul' in the phrase 'my stress lay of the incidents in the development of a soul' from the dedication to *Sordello*, which is a general description of Browning's poetry (*Language* 51). However, instead of arguing for the importance of soul from a religious point of view, the narrator here clearly states his opposition to Miranda's naïve Catholicism and buys into the naturalist theory of heredity and milieu (1150-1231). But unlike in the naturalist novel, where heredity accounts for physical desires and preferences and often reduces characters to quasi-animals, in Miranda's case the influence of his 'Castilian passionate blind blood' (1152) and his orthodox Catholic upbringing give him a spiritual dimension which is finally evaluated as a strength. Heroes of the naturalist novel who succumb to religious mysticism indulge in a perverse mixture of religious ecstasy and sensuality and die of consumption, which is a sign of their weakness.⁷⁶ Miranda dies as a result of his conscious choice of soul over body. The narrator's interpretation of Miranda's fall from the Belvedere as motivated by his trust that the Virgin will perform a miracle to save him is driven by the belief that, though corrupted, Miranda's faith finally enables him to overcome the split of his personality. The narrator's refusal to conceive of a meaningful story which lacks a spiritual dimension is diametrically opposed to Zola's dismissal of the importance of the soul in his first programmatic statement, the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), in which he declares that in his novel only physical causes determine the plot and '[l]'âme est parfaitement absente, j'en conviens aisément, puisque je l'ai voulu ainsi' (iii).⁷⁷

Indeed, the narrator's insistence on the importance of 'soul' throughout the text seems like a direct challenge to Zola's famous preface. 'Soul' is a requirement for the observer who wants to perceive the hidden beauty in the landscape around Saint-Rambert (58 and 64). And it is the ability to see into Miranda's soul which recommends Browning's friend Joseph Milsand as the ideal adviser for the hero (2902). The tribute

⁷⁶ The most famous examples are the eponymous hero of the Goncourts' *Madame Gervaisais* (1869), which Browning could have known, and Marthe Mouret in Zola's *La Conquête de Plassans*, published less than a year after *RCNCC* in 1874.

⁷⁷ 'I readily acknowledge that the soul is perfectly absent, since I wanted it thus' (my translation). There is an unconscious irony in the fact that Miranda's internal conflict foreshadows the artistic evolution of one of Zola's most ardent disciples, Joris-Karl Huysmans: he abandoned his initial radical naturalism for a decadent aestheticism (which corresponds to Miranda's worldly lifestyle) and eventually settled for Catholic mysticism (comparable to Miranda's devotion to La Ravissante).

to Milsand's sensitivity and practical counsel, which is spoken by an angel, contrasts with the absence of these qualities in Miss Thackeray, the official dedicatee and only other real name in the text. At the same time, parallels between 'Browning' and Milsand let the angel's apostrophe to the friend appear as the narrator's veiled self-observation: 'Browning' the 'British man' (382) and the anglophile Milsand who 'reads an English newspaper' (2913) have a detached foreigner's perspective (Kenny 156); both pace the 'beach, mere razor-edge 'twixt earth and sea' (181). Their borderline situation 'on this edge of things' (187)⁷⁸ gives them a wider perspective. It also recalls the definition of the poet's intermediate position between earthly life (the land) and the divine realm (the sea) in 'Amphibian'. The narrator's self-portrayal in line 545 as the physician Abaris, who as a priest of Apollo combines the scientific and spiritual (Kenny 155), confirms his self-conceptualisation as a mediator and the belief that an access to both the physical and the spiritual dimensions of a character is necessary to comprehend him.

The passage about Milsand is a disguised self-reference, but the whole poem abounds with more obvious superfluous self-references, for instance when the narrator harps on the point that he has seen Clara ('Her, whom myself saw', 3271), or comments on her Parisian dress although he has to 'confess [his] ignorance' (833) in matters of fashion. Many of the digressions contribute no additional information to the plot, but merely serve to characterise the narrator, such as his description of himself as 'sceptical in every inch of me' (541) of miracles. The many digressions, prolepses,⁷⁹ ellipses,⁸⁰ and pauses⁸¹ in a narrative which is generally so cinematographic that the reader might forget the mediating presence of the narrator, are regular reminders that our enjoyment of the story depends on his creative power which structures the events and creates suspense. Yet the self-references never fully disrupt the narrative. The

⁷⁸ There may be an allusion to Bishop Blougram's interest in 'the dangerous edge of things' (395). Blougram goes on to mention 'new French books', and his examples of the 'honest thief, the tender murderer [...]' bear a resemblance to Miranda's contradictory character.

⁷⁹ E.g. '... how can I in conscience longer keep / My little secret that the man is dead / I, for artistic purpose, talk about / As if he lived still?' (723-6) or '(His brother – I will tell you in a trice)' (1618) or 'At any rate, I see no slightest sign / Of folly (let me tell you in advance)' (3229-30).

⁸⁰ E.g. 'With much asseveration I omit' (2724) or 'I will not scandalize you and recount / How [...]' (2734).

⁸¹ Especially before the beginning of the narrative between Parts I and II and before its climax between Parts III and IV.

narrator acts rather like the *transcendental buffoon* of Romantic Irony, who alternately contributes to and destroys the dramatic illusion. He is confronted with the same problem as Mr Sludge, who proclaims himself to be a medium and a mere empty vessel, but who at the same time has to insist that his distinctive personality is needed to conjure up the spirits of the deceased. Similarly, the narrator's self-conceptualisation as an impersonal objective poet in analogy to the French realist and naturalist movements demands a self-effacement which endangers the audience's appreciation of his identity as a creator. The dramatic presentation of himself as a speaker who is so obviously caught up in contradictions because he cannot help asserting his creative power is for the author a way of signalling his awareness of the dilemma without having to resolve it.

The poem offers some glimpses of the fecundity of the narrator's imagination through elaborate descriptions, fanciful digressions, such as the two alternative sketches of Miranda and Clara's idyllic life which are inserted in the description of Clairvaux (683-94), the nightcap exposition (275-370) or the discreet hint in 'she might soliloquize' (3664) that Clara's monologue is his creation. His self-conscious use of language counteracts the realist notion of language as a transparent medium which should not draw attention to its own materiality. The narrator takes particular pride in his metaphors. He inserts signposts to point them out, such as 'That tower and tower, – our image, bear in mind!' (1445) or '(back I go again / To the first simile)' (2107-8). He also makes much of his idea of the polyanthus as a better metaphor for Clara than Miranda's primrose (1503-4) and tells his listener to 'note the happy name' 'de Millefleurs' (1513). Whereas in the enounced the speaker thereby demonstrates his ability to perceive a telling name, in the enunciation, the author, who has invented that name, demonstrates his ability to find a fictional name to replace the real 'de Beaupré'.

The narrator's idiomatic expressions involving the word 'hand' with reference to Miranda, who after his self-mutilation literally has no hands, are another conspicuous use of language. In contrast to other cases of artistically structured language – such as the rhymes in dramatic monologues which have to be attributed to the author and not to the consciousness of the speaker –, it is clear that the speaker here is conscious of what he is doing. In a manner again resembling the parodic version of a poet, Mr Sludge, and his self-conscious use of rhyme ('Mr Sludge' 1182-4 and 1283-5), the

narrator hardly ever makes a word play without applauding his own ingenuity in self-referential asides. These are implicit appeals to his audience to be more vigilant in his observation of the level of enunciation in order to appreciate the narrator's linguistic versatility:

For poverty, he had an open hand
... Or stop – I use the wrong expression here –
An open purse, then, ever at appeal [...] (737-9)

[...] hand in hand,
... Or side by side, I say by preference – [...] (802-3)

There was no washing hands of him (alack,
You take me? – in the figurative sense!) [...] (3106-7)

The narrator's sensitiveness to the relation between literal and figurative meaning contrasts with his naïve protagonist, who has difficulties distinguishing between these two and therefore thinks he can rid himself of his sins of the body by burning off his hands.

The passage describing Miranda's un-creative artistic dilettantism (2071-2143) offers another comparison of the hero and his creator. As in the presentation of Browning's *alter ego* Milsand, there is no explicit self-reference when the narrator complains about the social alienation of the poet who is ahead of his time. But the addition of the words 'Artistry' and 'artist-' (2081 and 2090) in the published text, which are not in the manuscript, bear witness to the author's endeavour to make the self-reference more obvious. Miranda does not have the courage to endeavour the eternal striving which 'Artistry being battle with the age / It lives in!' (2081-2) demands. His static passivity contrasts with the perpetual forward movement of the artist, a movement which we find mirrored in the narrator's walk during his narration. In a less obvious way than in *Sordello*, the hero, to whom the narrator at first does not seem to bear any relation, thus acts as a foil which helps to characterise his creator. However, in the narrator's final evaluation of the couple, Miranda's *moral* aspirations, which cannot be realised, are favourably compared to Clara, 'the finished little piece!' (4035), who lacks a moral concern. Reiterating his celebration of the incomplete from

'Old Pictures in Florence', the narrator uses Miranda's example to illustrate that 'the incomplete, / More than completion, matches the immense' (4031-2).⁸²

Another indication of Miranda's function for Browning's self-observation is that his monologue on the Belvedere, the climax of the poem, is delayed by a definition of poetry:

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)

The distinctive feature of poetry, or rather Browning's poetry, is not that it presents physical or verbal action – an ironic point to make within the frame of a narrative poem, the genre which is usually defined by external action. Instead, the poet's special faculty lies in his ability to see through speech to the thoughts which motivate it. His focus is not on first order observation, such as that in the newspaper, which is limited to the recording of external facts, but on the second order observation of motivations. Thus the dramatic monologue is speech, but its enunciation allows us to access the speaker's underlying thoughts. In *RCNCC*, Miranda's interior monologues, such as the one which follows this intervention, elucidate the motivations for his jump. His thoughts might only take up 'a minute's space' (3286) but 'One particle of ore beats out such leaf!' (3287), i.e. the poet extends and reshapes this raw material into an aesthetic form – a point which is highlighted by the pun on 'leaf' as paper.

The narrator's attitude to unlikely or fantastic literary plots summarises the main aspects in Browning's observation of his literary method in *RCNCC*: a general agreement with the subjects and method of realism and naturalism, which conflicts with his belief that they are too rigorous and his desire to use the text to display his creative power. On the one hand, the narrator signals that he shares the realists' and naturalists' denigration of unlikely plots when assuming an ironic distance towards his naïve

⁸² Cf. also the scholar's striving for perfection in contrast to the men in the plain in 'A Grammarian's Funeral', a poem which foreshadows the 'turf and towers' theme through the ascent of the mountain.

protagonist, who credulously accepts Clara's romance-like false life-story and believes in miracles. The narrator's ironic reference to Miranda's father as 'the lord of the Aladdin's cave' (1841), which evokes the fantastic genre of the oriental tale, shows a similar detachment. But on the other hand, he also appears to be seriously attracted to the romance, a genre which does not at all agree with his realist technique and which the naturalists vehemently condemned for its artificial plot structure and aristocratic subject matter.⁸³ Fascinated by the jeweller's 'Trade that admits of much romance, indeed' (589), the narrator sketches out a number of possible romance plots which involve jewels, thereby reversing the association of the jeweller with objective mimetic representation from the ring metaphor in *R&B*. At least one of these romance plots is recorded in 'authentic story-books' (593): Carlyle's 'The Diamond Necklace' (1837), alluded to in lines 594-5, in which Carlyle insists that he only recounts the affair of the necklace which the Prince de Rohan bought for Queen Marie-Antoinette in order to illustrate that 'Romance exists' in the present age and 'in Reality alone' (*Works* 28: 329). In referring to this true story, the narrator thus argues with Carlyle against the naturalists' rigorous rejection of such plots. However, other plots about jewels which the narrator imagines are more clearly fictional. Lines 600-3 seem to allude to E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'Das Fräulein von Scudéry' (1819). According to Hoffmann's framing narrative, the story is based on a fact in a chronicle and an anecdote, so that the text combines historical fact and the fantastic (Hoffmann 709-11). This indicates that the narrator is clearly less committed to the realist-naturalist agenda than his irony towards Miranda's faith in unlikely plots suggests. At the same time, he demonstrates a higher state of consciousness than in *R&B*, where the poet-speaker does not even reflect on the fact that his theory of the St. George plot transgresses the rules of verisimilitude.

A similar contradiction appears when the narrator interprets the plot within a dramatic framework. At first sight, the reference to the genre which usually lacks the mediating narrative voice and his pledge to 'wring you out some tragedy / From even such a perfect commonplace!' (729-30) seem in line with the realist agenda of

⁸³ See Zola's praise of 'l'absence de tout élément romanesque' ('the absence of any romance element') and '[l]a négation du romanesque' ('the negation of the romance-like') in his interpretation of Flaubert as a precursor of naturalism (*Romanciers naturalistes* 126 and 149-50). See also the Goncourts' project of writing the tragedy of the 'petits et pauvres' ('the ordinary and poor people') in a democratic state without a legal aristocracy ('Préface' to *Germinie Lacerteux* 56).

presenting without much authorial intervention stories which do not seem to qualify for a literary treatment. But it turns out that the analogies the narrator has in mind are with the most unnaturalistic dramatic conventions. He introduces Sganarelle, the stock character from the *commedia dell'arte* in Molière's comedies, as a personification of the temptations of the immoral lifestyle to which Miranda is exposed in Paris (1261ff.). And his labelling of his characters as 'the masks / That figure in this little history' (3993-4) implies that he sees them as unrealistic types. The appearance of Clara's husband is presented as a mixture of a melodramatic *coup de théâtre* and the divine intervention in ancient drama:

Forth steps the needy tailor on the stage,
Deity-like from dusk machine of fog [...] (1878-9)

The husband turns out to be the very opposite of the saving *deus ex machina*. He denounces Clara's relationship with Miranda in order to get a divorce which prevents her from sharing in his newly-acquired wealth. Through the humorously inflated diction here and the parody of the *deus ex machina*, the narrator expresses his contempt of these archaic, artificial literary conventions and their inappropriateness for the story he recounts.

However, to retain the attention of Miss Thackeray, who wants to walk on at the very moment when he is about to start his narrative, the narrator is obliged to have recourse to a device which reintroduces the authorial voice into drama. Like the expounder of the puppet show in the opening of *Sordello* or the intrusive narrator in *Vanity Fair*, he makes a self-conscious verbal flourish:

No, sit and stay!
Now comes my moment, with the thrilling throw
Of curtain [...] (1010-2)

The exaggerated theatricality, which is highlighted by the alliterations, again reinforces his denigration of this device; but as in the case of the reference to romance *motifs*, the commitment to the realist-naturalist stance becomes subordinate to the delight in presenting himself as a self-conscious creator, for which purpose he is ready to overthrow his general method.

V.3.2. The Epilogue

After the many more or less covert reminders of the narrator's creative agency in the main part of the poem, this issue becomes the overt subject of the epilogue, in which the narrator addresses Miss Thackeray months later in London's 'dark Winter-gloom' (4231), after he has written down the main part. Only now do we learn that the preceding 4229 lines were not the faithful transcript of one side of a real spontaneous dialogue during a walk around Saint Aubin, alias Saint-Rambert, which internal evidence in lines 503 and 508 allows us to date as 29 August 1872.⁸⁴ In spite of the many realistic allusions to the walk, the scenery and Miss Thackeray's reactions, as well as the narrative pauses which sustain this impression of authenticity, the monologue now turns out to be a deliberately and artistically composed literary text. In Siegchrist's words, 'What the reader has been expertly led to believe was a process is shown to have been product, and the degree to which he is surprised is a measure of that same expertise' (149).

It is neither the first nor the last time that Browning uses such a device. It is closely echoed in *La Saisiaz* (see Chapter V.4.2) and more freely in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, in which the 'Epilogue' introduces the higher narrative level of the author of the collection, who thus underlines his creativity and calls into question the validity of the philosophy voiced in the preceding poems. *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* prefigures the device in that it discloses only twelve lines before its end that the monologue is not delivered in front of a prostitute in London exile, but that it is a soliloquy uttered while the prince is still reigning in his palace. The prince's explanation that the mere sight of his cousin's seal 'Set all these fancies floating for an hour' (2153) emphasises his creative power and reinforces the reader's awareness of the prince's powers of deception. It is ironic that Browning in *RCNCC* indirectly likens himself to this controversial speaker. The similarity to the monologue *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* again suggests that *RCNCC* should be read as a dramatic monologue, paying attention to how the speaker conceives of himself and his world.

⁸⁴ Browning's handwritten addition of the date 'August, 1872' at the end of the main part on the first set of proofs in the Berg Collection foregrounds the gap between the two parts.

Siegchrist's essay shows well how the creativity which is invested in the poem is foregrounded, but since he does not draw a clear distinction between the speaker of the main part, the voice in the epilogue, and the author of the whole poem, he cannot describe the process of self-conceptualisation which happens in the text. Watkins falls into the opposite extreme when she considers the substitution of the red / white and turf / tower dichotomies by the ruddy star imagery in the epilogue as a sufficient indication that Browning 'dissociates himself, characteristically, from the speaker in his poem' ('RCNCC and Carlyle' 371) without further wondering how the voices in the main part and the epilogue are related to each other. In my view, a clear definition of the two voices is essential in order to understand how the poem acts as a means of self-observation and self-conceptualisation, and it is also possible thanks to some apparently negligible details in the epilogue. The epilogist explains:

I just as good as told you, in a flash,
The while we paced the sands before my house,
All this poor story – truth and nothing else.
Accept that moment's flashing, amplified,
Impalpability reduced to speech,
Conception proved by birth, – no other change! (4233-8)

Although he twice claims not to have changed anything about the 'poor story', we can guess that the real events on 29 August 1872 must have been slightly different from the way they are presented in the main part. Firstly, the story Browning told then – 'story' in the narratological sense of 'execution of the plot' – was only a short basic version which needed to be 'amplified'; secondly, the story was not told during an inland walk from Saint Aubin (Saint-Rambert) to Tailleville (Clairvaux), during which the interlocutors conveniently passed locations as Browning came to mention them in his narration, but Browning really told it on the beach in front of his holiday home. The speaker of the main part is therefore not simply a former self of the speaker of the epilogue who creates him, but the *fictional* version of his former self. Consequently, the greatest imaginative achievement of the poem is not the invention of Miranda's internal monologue on the Belvedere but the epilogist's creation of himself as a work of art: the dramatic monologue of his fictional former self in Normandy as he develops his narrative, in which he engages with the realist and naturalist conventions. The addition of the epilogue underlines that the main part is above all a means of Browning's

creative self-conceptualisation and critical self-observation. There is no indication that the enounced of the epilogue is undermined, i.e. that Browning as the author also distances himself from the epilogist. The epilogue merely helps the reader to see that the purpose of the text is self-observation, since for once the observer also appears as a voice in the text and not only as an abstract author without a voice.

What the enunciation does somewhat undermine in the epilogue, though, is the traditional method of self-definition through autobiography. The parallel with the autobiographical final turn to the author at the moment of writing emphasises that the rest of the poem does not follow the conventional autobiographical retrospective narrative. As in *R&B*, Browning refuses to define himself through events in his life. Instead, only his present self and his second order observation of the world from the point of view of a poet as it is expressed in his narration suffice to characterise him. In the main part, the narrator states explicitly that creation without any self-reference can be a means of self-discovery for the artist. There is a mutual influence between the poet and his subject matter, which is like wax and

Which, as you bendingly grow warm above,
 Begins to take impressment from your breath?
 Which, as your will itself were plastic here
 Nor needed exercise or handicraft,
 From formless moulds itself to correspond
 With all you think and feel and are – in fine
 Grows a new revelation of yourself,
 Who know now for the first time what you want [...] (852-9)

The confrontation with the foil of Miranda's character certainly is such a self-revelation for Browning (cf. Ryals *Later Poetry* 97).

Through the epilogue, the author distances himself from yet another literary convention. The epilogue destroys the illusion promulgated by some Romantic and post-Romantic theorists that it is possible for a poet to create spontaneously a narrative of high artistic quality and afterwards to simply record the result in writing. It reveals the inauthenticity of the preceding monologue and thereby stresses – in the spirit of Coleridge in his dispute with Wordsworth – the importance of the author's conscious creativity. This happens both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, the information that the monologue in Normandy is a deliberately constructed text makes us appreciate retrospectively the artistry in the enunciation. For instance, the very early references to

the Miranda plot – such as the mention of ‘The Firm Miranda’ in line 11 or the idea of the hypothetical ‘transfer – wrought / By angels’ (45-6) of the Joyeux church to Saint-Rambert, which foreshadows Miranda’s attempted flight – turn out to be neither coincidences nor insincerities of the narrator who knew all the time what he was driving at, but devices planned by the author of the monologue. Explicitly, in the passage from the epilogue quoted above, Browning addresses a frequent concern in his poetry: the difficulty of bridging the gap between conception and expression. It is highlighted by the temporal and spatial distance between the two parts (‘months ago and miles away’, 4232) and by the conception / birth metaphor (4238), which also implies a long temporal interval. The difficulty of converting the impalpable idea, whose transitory nature is stressed through the words ‘flash’ (4233) and ‘flashing’ (4236), into the ‘speech’ of a poem, suggests that spontaneous, quasi-inspired artistic expression is in fact impossible. Thus, even the epilogue is not exclusively self-observation but becomes, as so often in Browning’s utterances *in propria persona*, the locus of a more general reflection on artistic creativity.

V.4. *La Saisiaz*

Although only its first one hundred and thirty-nine lines are narrative and the rest of the poem is meditative, *La Saisiaz* is analysed here because it bears important structural resemblances to other poems in this chapter. Like *Sordello*, *La Saisiaz* draws on the device of a pivotal autobiographical episode which causes Browning to reflect on his values, and it makes statements about some of his literary and intellectual predecessors. It also revisits the self-observing authorial epilogue from *RCNCC*. Largely leaving aside the theological implications of Browning’s argument, I will focus on the second order observation of the speaker’s method of discovering his convictions and how he relates these to his identity as a poet, and on the author’s retrospective observation of this thought process as it is expressed in the epilogue.

In a letter to J. D. Williams, Browning describes the poem as

the only one relating to a personal experience (at least, *directly*) in all my books. I could not tell the incidents of that memorable week more faithfully in prose and as an accurate account of what happened: and they impressed me so much that I could proceed to nothing else till I had in some way put it all on paper. There was much more to say, – but what *is* said is strictly true. (Collins ‘Letters’ 14)

Indeed, *La Saisiaz* initially advertises itself as a highly personal utterance and a conscious self-observation, fostering the reader's hope for a more extended disclosure of personal experience and emotions. But as the phrase 'There was much more to say' hints, the poem turns out to be yet another proof of Browning's reluctance to reveal his innermost self and of his diversion of attention from himself to the criticism of others. The text is Browning's way of coming to terms with the fact of mortality, occasioned by the sudden death of Browning's friend Annie Egerton Smith during their Swiss holiday in the chalet La Saisiaz. His first approach is conventional: an emotional narrative of that event, largely seen from his perspective on the day of her death, which lets the experience appear more immediate. Interspersed passages of natural description contribute to create an elegiac mood (see Chapter III.1). However, this strategy is soon replaced by a rational argument, which occupies the main part. For F. E. L. Priestley, the poem displays Browning's method of objectivation of personal experience in process:

In its general pattern, the poem moves towards a tightening of control; that is, towards reticence. It moves from direct expression of emotion towards a suppression of it, from the personal to the impersonal, and one gets the impression that the real theme is contained precisely in this movement, that the poem records Browning's *katharsis*, his successful emergence from shock. (242)

On the level of the enounced, Browning's proclaimed aim of the meditation is to find out which of his opinions on the issues of immortality and theodicy are based on what he takes to be fact and which on intuitive faith (208-16). He objectifies this systematic observation of his religious opinions even further by dramatising his thought process as a debate between the abstract entities of Fancy and Reason with his soul for umpire. Through the typographical layout of the debate and the many logical indicators, the enunciation exposes the strategy of his effort to constitute his faith for the reader's observation. Building on the Cartesian provisos of the existence of man and God, Fancy adds another four postulates in response to Reason's counters, which combine to sketch out Browning's belief in our earthly existence as a probation for eternal life. But the method of grounding faith in rationality defeats itself: Reason explains that if we are aware that we have to act virtuously to attain Heaven, we will do it as naturally as breathing in order to survive (493ff.). Being virtuous is hence no longer a free moral

choice, and the good / bad dichotomy is devalued. Realising that his argument has ‘come back full circle’ (525), the speaker falls back on his first two Cartesian premises, which are only taken for granted because they surpass his rationality: ‘[...] that they o’erpass my power of proving, proves them such’ (223).

The device of the debate is not just another instance of Browning’s usual dialogic mode of thinking, which is also apparent in the fact that the utterance is addressed to Miss Smith. The debate structure also indicates the poem’s relation to the symposium on ‘The Soul and Future Life’ in the June – October 1877 issues of the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. Although the speaker repeatedly emphasises that his reasoning is based solely on his own experience, the abortive Fancy – Reason debate does not represent the way in which Browning really constructs his faith. It is less a self-observation than a dialogic critique (see Chapter IV.1) of the empiricist side in the debate in *The Nineteenth Century*, more precisely Frederic Harrison’s two-part article in the June and July issues, to which the symposium in September and October responded. Browning adopts Harrison’s rational method without any reference to Christian doctrine and – as Cory Bieman Davies shows (11ff.) – also his diction, and through the failure of this approach challenges Harrison’s stance.⁸⁵ Moreover, the dependence of Reason on Fancy’s provisos in the debate rejects the empiricist diametrical opposition of fancy and fact. Browning undermines this dichotomy both earlier in *R&B* (I, 464) and later in *Asolando*, which bears the subtitle *Fancies and Facts*, by suggesting the possibility of a transition between the two. It is only when the co-operation of Fancy and Reason ultimately reaches an *impasse*, that Browning presents his own solution. In formulating his personal faith within the poem, he faces up to Harrison’s charge that non-scientific imagination is a ‘crude dreaming’ (Harrison 625) and no legitimate means of arriving at knowledge (Davies 9). Browning makes the paradoxical need for uncertainty about the afterlife, which led the Fancy – Reason debate into a dead-end, the basis of his faith. In replacing reason and objective certainty by intuition and hope, he defies Harrison, who disparagingly calls such a rationally

⁸⁵ In his synopsis of the contributions to the *Nineteenth Century* symposium in ‘*La Saisiaz and The Nineteenth Century*’, Fairchild disproves DeVane’s thesis that Browning avoided references to Christian revelation because the symposium forbade them (*Handbook* 422). Hair compares the reasoning in the debate, especially Browning’s theory of language, to Locke (*Language* 260-8). The general parallel with the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is not surprising, since the article by the empiricist Harrison is of course informed by Locke’s thought and discourse.

unfounded 'celestial transcendentalism' a 'fancy' (Harrison 841). The speaker freely admits his ideas to be purely subjective. His relativism goes so far that he concedes that his conviction that grass is green may be as mistaken as his neighbour's claim that it is red (274-80).

V.4.1. Self-Definition in Relation to Literary and Intellectual Predecessors

By line 545, the poem's aim of defining Browning's faith has been achieved. Yet he apparently still feels the need to outline his stance. He now chooses to delineate his intuitive belief in opposition to the confident certainty expressed by some literary and intellectual predecessor. In the enounced, the speaker is full of deference to much greater writers, but this unpretentious pose is not altogether convincing, since earlier on two authors with high credentials in religious poetry are enlisted to support his intuitive faith. Firstly, Christopher Smart is alluded to through the multiple quotation of the phrase 'Dared and done' (1, 25-7, 32, 138) from the final line of his 'Song to David', one of Browning's favourite phrases.⁸⁶ The *Parleying* with Smart documents that Browning considered the 'Song to David' as inspired and superior to the more rational endeavours to convey the divine mystery in the rest of Smart's work.⁸⁷ Secondly, lines 212-16 of *La Saisiaz* paraphrase the final passage from the digression on immortality in Dante's *Convivio* II, viii, which Browning copied onto EBB's testament (see the letter of 11 May 1876, Hood 172). After different rational arguments for a belief in the afterlife, Dante here eventually grounds his faith in Christ's teachings and in his personal belief in Beatrice's eternal life. Although the speaker explicitly applies the latter part of the argument to Miss Smith, the implication is of course that Browning, like Dante, builds his faith on the belief in the eternal life of his beloved, EBB.

The poets from whom the speaker distances himself are those who express a belief in immortality but either do not admit or understate its subjective, personal nature. Ryals considers the use of the eight-foot couplet as in 'Locksley Hall' a proof that Tennyson is criticised here. Ryals has no doubt that Browning casts 'his

⁸⁶ Cf. the final line of the 1888 version of *Luria*, 'Old Pictures in Florence' 154, 'Abt Vogler' 95, *Aristophanes' Apology* 915, 3010 and 5658, *R&B* I, 801; IV, 1106; V, 455, and the *Inn Album* 2410.

⁸⁷ Browning could not have known Smart's other visionary poem 'Jubilate Agno', which was only published in 1939.

determinedly antivisionary poem in the same form as one of the visionary poems of his more famous colleague' (*Later Poetry* 158). This interpretation is only based on the intertextual reference through the metre. There is no clear evidence that Browning intended a criticism of his contemporary, who like him viewed the elegy as a problematic genre and whose confidence in God and an afterlife in *In Memoriam* are hard-earned. However, line 355 explicitly rejects Milton's and Pope's confident declaration that they have the authority to 'vindicate the ways of God to Man' (*Essay on Man* I, 16, echoing *Paradise Lost* I, 26). This contrasts sharply with the speaker's modest remark that he 'Nowise dare[s] to play the spokesman for [his] brothers' (350). For such explanations of God's ways, the allusion to Job xxxviii ff. instead refers us to 'the dread voice' (354) in the whirlwind of God himself.

Browning's more extended direct confrontation is with Byron, Rousseau, Voltaire and Gibbon (549-604). Surprisingly, the speaker is not interested in discussing their views on the specific point of immortality, but criticises their general pessimism and (ab)use of their fame. Fame is of course the common theme which links *La Saisiaz* with its companion piece, *The Two Poets of Croisic*, which recounts two examples of the precariousness of literary fame. The shift in emphasis in the second part of *La Saisiaz* suggests that even religion is eventually just a welcome occasion for making a point about aesthetics.⁸⁸

Browning's censure of these four writers is clearly stated in the enounced, but there is a subtler undermining of Byron's pessimism observable in the enunciation. In fact, the intertextual references to the second half of Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (lxviii ff.) are more numerous and surreptitious than the obvious parody of typically Byronic misanthropic passages in lines 564-70, which Pettigrew and Collins signal in the notes of their edition.⁸⁹ They combine to make *Childe Harold* the second target of dialogic critique in the poem in addition to Harrison's article. In order to refute Byron's position, the speaker appropriates both the stance of the narrator of *Childe Harold*, who surveys the panorama of Lake Lemman, and his discourse. A detail

⁸⁸ The same can be said about the *Parleyings* which are not explicitly about poetry, for instance the sequel to the attack on Gibbon's interpretation of history as a decline is the *Parleying* 'With Gerard de Lairese', which is indeed a confrontation with Matthew Arnold's poetics.

⁸⁹ To avoid confusion between the two poems, references to *La Saisiaz* will be by line numbers and references to *Childe Harold* by stanza.

in the early descriptive passage in *La Saisiaz* foreshadows the final confrontation with Byron: echoing Byron's narrator (lxviii-lxxv), the speaker contrasts man's alienation in the city with his feeling of being at one with nature, but he counters this with the remark that 'there's something more than Nature, man requires' (100) – though, ironically, the first thing that comes to his mind turns out to be 'Quiet slow sure money-making' (102). He does not only reinterpret the Byronic epithets for Rousseau ('eloquence', lxxvii), Gibbon ('learning', cvii) and Voltaire ('wit', cvi) as negative (588; 586; 596), but also reverses the implications of other words from *Childe Harold*.

This is most evident in Browning's treatment of Rousseau, who is transformed from Byron's prophetic 'Pythian', from whose cave came 'Those oracles which set the world in flame, / Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more' (lxxxi), into a 'fiery flying serpent' (554), a flitting and spitting 'aspic' (583) and a 'python' (584) coiling around a tree, an obvious allusion to Satan in Paradise. The same applies to Byron's positive imagery of fire in relation to Rousseau. In *Childe Harold*, Rousseau was 'all fire' (lxxvi), his words were 'like sunbeams, dazzling as they past / The eyes' (lxxvii), his love was 'as a tree / On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame / Kindled he was, and blasted' (lxxviii) as he wrote 'his burning page' (lxxviii). Browning conflates these and Byron's description of a sublime nightly thunderstorm over the lake into the grotesque symbolic scenario of himself brandishing the torch of fame, so that Byron's 'phosphoric sea' (xciii) becomes 'phosphoric fame' (557). Byron's text is further travestied, since a function of the violent thunderstorm in *Childe Harold* is to support the eulogy to the concept of love in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. *La Saisiaz* never mentions this aspect of Rousseau, which is so central for Byron, and exclusively associates the destructive storm with the cultural pessimism in such texts as the *Discours sur l'inégalité*.

The points of criticism voiced here are again proof that, as in *R&B*, Browning calls into question the authority of the author's point of view. In using literary texts to impose their pessimistic *Weltanschauung*, Rousseau, Voltaire, Byron and Gibbon profit from the general idea that the writer's perspective has general validity or is privileged, a view which the speaker here vehemently discards for himself. He dismisses the overbearing authors who invite readers to passively believe them with the unconvincing argument: 'Which believe – for I believe it' (563 and 571). This expresses Browning's

contempt for the reader who adopts uncritically the famous writers' views and does not take the stance of a second order observer of their texts.

This evaluation of the readership appears also in the first of two fictional comments on Browning by a voice which appears to represent the public. This first comment is inserted immediately before the speaker's confrontation with the other writers: 'Sad summing up of all to say! / *Athanasius contra mundum*, why should he hope more than they?' (545-6) This displays the public's need for the kind of comprehensive explanation of his faith which Browning does not give. The second comment follows this passage. Unlike the first comment, it is in quotation marks, which give this invented direct discourse more authenticity. It articulates the most positive reaction which Browning can realistically hopes for. The commentator's concluding line, "Well? Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God" (604), conveys a certain acknowledgement of Browning's position. However, two details in the enunciation of this speech once more point to the problem of Browning's faith. The casual "Well? Why", which betrays the public's relative indifference, and the return of this speaker to the Cartesian provisos of the soul's and God's existence instead of an acceptance of Browning's principle of hope indicate that Browning cannot expect to convince others of a faith whose value lies in its subjectivity and uncertainty.

There is an irony – of which even the author seems unconscious – in the fact that in attacking the influence of the four famous dead writers, Browning actually agrees with Harrison, his other target of critique. The continuing impact of these writers on readers supports Harrison's idea that a man can gain immortality in the memories of later generations and that the mental powers of the dead stimulate the brains of the living (Harrison 835-6).⁹⁰ Moreover, in explicating his faith in the poem, Browning becomes himself guilty of using his text to influence his readers. Even though the enounced emphasises that the aim of the utterance is only self-observation and that the views expressed are purely subjective, the enunciation is of course designed to convince the reader of Browning's position through the way his faith is introduced. As Drew puts it, his stance

⁹⁰ Cf. the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto* which agrees with Harrison's view that great men only become acknowledged as creators after their death (Harrison 837).

has almost the status of a rational belief, since it appears in the poem only after all the alternative possibilities have been systematically scrutinized and found unacceptable. (164)

The insertion of the cautiously approving second comment by the public bears witness to Browning's effort to provide readers with a model which they should follow in their reception of his poem.

Browning the author is surely aware of the conflict between his condemnation and his envy of the impact which the four famous authors have on the public. His strategy of controlling this all-too-obvious desire to emulate them is to verbalise it with such exaggeration that the enunciation signals his aloofness from it. The grotesque symbolic vision of the speaker brandishing the giant torch, which unites all four thinkers, is a clear break in both style and tone. The melodramatic apostrophe (573) – to whom is not quite clear –, the stereotypical snake-imagery and the abundance of alliterations (e.g. 577-8 and many alliterative compounds) sound artificial and are incongruous with the much less obtrusive enunciation of the rest of the text. Only in this short vision, which is derived from the Romantic Byron's eulogy of the pre-Romantic Rousseau and in which Browning temporarily grows to the giant size of the unattainable predecessors, can he for once play at being the great Romantic poet he would have liked to become in his youth. But since it is so belated, the re-enactment of the Romantic pose can only be parodic.

The irony here need not imply that Browning's acknowledgement of his predecessors' merit and his debt to them is not earnest. This applies particularly to Byron. The slightly ironised but nevertheless reverential gesture of plucking an ivy-leaf at Diodati (555-6) is a token of this.⁹¹ Browning would certainly not have made, and much less recorded, his visits to Diodati and Rousseau's Bossey if his opposition to Byron and Rousseau had not been driven by an underlying veneration. Moreover, even though Browning always rejected his misanthropic celebration of nature, Byron is very probably the inspiration for Browning's first poetic endeavour *Incondita* (Maynard 169-70), and self-conscious Byronic narrators such as that of *Don Juan* are an influence on the narrators in *Sordello* and *RCNCC*. Similarly, we have seen that *La*

⁹¹ Cf. a letter to EBB of 22 August 1846, in which Browning mentions his 'interest in the places [Byron] had visited, in relics of him: I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure [...]' (*Corr.* 13: 280).

Saisiaz mocks Byron's ideas through the appropriation of *Childe Harold*, but Browning does not fully repudiate Byron's model, since he still chooses the narrator's stance on Lake Lemman for a serious exploration of his faith. Furthermore, Browning repeats the move from *Pacchiarotto* of usurping a central element of the Romantic self-conceptualisation and applying it to himself (see Chapter IV.4): when he styles himself an '*Athanasius contra mundum*' (546), he imitates the Byronic self-portrayal as solitary in opposition to society (*Childe Harold* cxii-cxiv) and pushes Byron into the role of the famous, socially accepted poet.

V.4.2. The Epilogue

The self-directed irony in the torch vision can be attributed to the consciousness of the speaker as a measure of self-protection, since he displays such a high self-consciousness; but it may also be the author's way of exposing his unacknowledged emulation or mimetic rivalry with his predecessors at the moment of utterance in order to distance himself from it. The epilogue, in which Browning looks back at the monologue of his former self after seven weeks, shows clearly that at the moment of writing the poem Browning distances himself from his reflection on Mont Salève. As in *RCNCC*, the function of the epilogue is to spell out the author's observation of his former – though not fictional – self and the text he has created. As in *RCNCC*, too, the distance is highlighted by temporal and spatial indicators ('that evening', 'Six weeks since' and 'Salève' versus 'Here in London's mid-November', 605-7). But in contrast to the other poem, this epilogue entangles Browning in contradictions in the effort to protect his work from criticism.

On the one hand, he emphasises the subjectivity of his views, of which the former self is already aware, and the condescending adjectives in 'poor smile' and 'pallid smile long since extinct' (605) prove that he no longer fully supports the view expressed by the former self. So far this could only be guessed from the exaggerations in the enunciation of the speaker's torch vision which undermined the enounced. Through the stylistic break between the epilogue and the previous passage, Browning clearly distances himself from the way in which these ideas were expressed.

On the other hand, in stating ‘Not so loosely thoughts were linked’ (606) and ‘Not so filmy was the texture’ (609), he declares that the original meditation was more stringent than the version he presents to the reader. This move protects his meditation from the accusation of incoherence, but it devalues his textualised version of it, since it implies that writing cannot recapture the original experience. This is of course a recurrent anxiety throughout Browning’s whole career, even though it never stopped him from writing, his only way of mediating experience to a broader audience. Accordingly, this deprecation of the written version of the meditation is counteracted by a parallel endeavour to underline the importance of the writing process. This appears in the internal contradictions within the chain metaphor:

Not so loosely thoughts were linked,
Six weeks since as I, descending in the sunset from Salève,
Found the chain, I seemed to forge there, flawless till it reached your grave, –
Not so filmy was the texture, but I bore it in my breast
Safe thus far. And since I found a something in me would not rest
Till I, link by link, unravelled any tangle of the chain,
– Here it lies, for much or little! (606-12)

Browning claims that through writing down his meditation, he unravelled its tangled argument. ‘[T]he chain, I *seemed* to forge there’ indicates that the argument only appeared to be convincing to the former self, but does not convince the author in the epilogue. Moreover, ‘Found’ in its prominent position at the beginning of a line implies that the act of conception on Mont Salève was not wholly conscious. This compares unfavourably with the meticulous unravelling of the chain in the process of writing.

Two other ambiguities make it difficult to pin down the author’s view of his meditation in the main part. The uncertain meaning of the description of the chain as ‘flawless till it reached your grave’ (608) has repeatedly been remarked upon. Opposed readings are possible: either the chain of argument *connects* the speaker and Miss Smith’s grave, or the chain *breaks off* when the speaker is again confronted with the fact of death (Priestley 254). Secondly, as in *RCNCC* and the *Parleying* ‘With Gerard de Lairesse’, the walk *motif* appears as a metaphor for the progress of the argument, and as in *Fifine at the Fair*, the movement is circular and ends in a neat closure.⁹² *La Saisiaz* adds to this the vertical movement up and down the mountain. But whereas one

⁹² The poem’s title also has a circular element. Before French spelling was standardised ‘s’ and ‘z’ were often interchangeable, so that ‘Saisiaz’ is a palindrome.

would usually expect the meditation to take place on the ascent, symbolising the compiling of arguments until the reflection reaches the summit, the monologue takes place on the descent. The reversal may stand for Browning's coming closer to re-establishing a contact with Miss Smith, who is buried in the valley, but it can also be read as symbolising the crumbling away of the mountain of the argument – either the Fancy – Reason debate or also his argument based on intuitive faith. These ambiguities might comprise two states of consciousness: that of the former self, who believes in the validity of his reasoning, and the superior consciousness of the author, who would like to dismiss it but still feels an uneasiness about admitting the failure of his former meditation. In any case, the massing of ambiguities in the epilogue disappoints the reader's expectation that the epilogue will clarify Browning's thoughts, and while trying to describe his process of composition, the epilogue obscures it.

The epilogue also focuses on the function which the poem has for its author. Whereas the purpose of the meditation for the former self was to arrive at a definition of his faith in order to come to terms with the fact of death, the creation of the text is the next necessary step in his grieving process: 'I found a something in me would not rest' (610). It is part of the self-therapy which Browning has to undergo to move on – a point which is made more forcefully in the letter to Williams, quoted above. This means that development is inevitably linked with self-observation and creation. Writing allows the author to relive his reflections, to fix them in writing and thus to preserve them for reference in the future:

I have lived all o'er again
That last pregnant hour: I saved it, just as I could save a root
Disinterred for re-interment when the time best helps to shoot. (612-14)

At this point I want to suggest another possible unacknowledged or inadvertent imitation of a seminal Romantic text, which might be another instance of mimetic rivalry: Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. The enounced of *La Saisiaz* condemns Rousseau for his cultural pessimism and indoctrinating of the reader, but Browning's use of creative writing to record the meditation on his walk comes surprisingly close to the principle of the *Rêveries*. Rousseau sees his text as a modified sequel to the self-scrutiny he undertook in the *Confessions* (999) and claims that it is only for his private use (1001). Similarly, despite the address to Miss Smith, *La Saisiaz*

is presented as a vehicle of private self-observation. Rousseau's objective is to fix the 'contemplations charmantes' he had during his daily walks in writing – itself a pleasant experience – in order to make them available for future enjoyment when he rereads and relives the experience (999). This project is echoed by Browning's metaphor of the root which will be disinterred (612-14). Only halfway into the text does Rousseau confess that his memory is selective and that his imagination embellishes the actual experience (1049), just as Browning only reveals in the epilogue that he made his tangled argument smoother and less disturbing by being selective in his memory. The concluding lines spell this out:

Life is stocked with germs of torpid life; but may I never wake
 Those of mine whose resurrection could not be without earthquake!
 Rest all such, unraised forever! Be this, sad yet sweet, the sole
 Memory evoked from slumber! Least part this: then what the whole? (615-18)

Like *RCNCC*, *La Saisiaz* is therefore not an authentic transcript of the original reflection in which these memories occurred but alters the experience. There is no evidence as to whether Browning read the *Rêveries*,⁹³ but he had of course encountered the use of creative writing as a consciously distorting self-observation which rearranges, and improves upon, an original experience in English Romantic poems, such as Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud...', which is another idealisation of an experience on a walk. It is remarkable that Browning, who otherwise emphasises his factual objectivity, resorts to such a Romantic technique to distort his self-observation. But at the same time the substitution of Romantic embellishment by ellipsis indicates how he differs from his predecessors.

'[R]e-interment' in line 614 means 're-planting' so that the experience can grow again and bear fruit. The confrontation with death is thereby revaluated as positive through the association with life, its opposite. However, the first connotation which 're-interment' spontaneously evokes is the burial of the dead. The dead are indeed related to the painful memory which Browning wants to keep buried. The allusion to the earthquake which accompanied Christ's resurrection (615-17) hints at the nature of the omitted material. Since Christ's resurrection is a basis of the Christian faith, the

⁹³ There was a copy of the 1772 edition of Rousseau's works in the Browning household (Kelley and Coley 168), but it did not contain the *Rêveries*, which were first published in 1782.

suppressed memories would give a better explanation of Browning's grounds of belief than the monologue we have just read. However, these thoughts are not related to the death and resurrection of Christ but – as the enjambement 'may I never wake / Those of mine' emphasises – to the 'germs of [Browning's personal] torpid life', the death and expected resurrection of EBB, who is only alluded to briefly in the reference to Dante (212-16). The *in propria persona* 'Epilogue' to *Ferishtah's Fancies*, which states that Browning's belief in divine love might have been caused by his experience of human love, confirms that EBB's love is indeed the basis of his faith. For Priestley, the omission of the disturbing memories of EBB explains the inconsistency in the chain metaphor: the reasoning was more confusing (tangled) but still more convincing ('not so loosely linked', 'flawless'), not just because it was rationally more complex than the written version, but also because more emotion was involved when he reflected on the most profound reasons of his faith (Priestley 256). The poem's closure on 'Least part this: then what the whole?' points out how big the ellipsis of the 'much more to say' from the letter to Williams is. Another candidate for conscious omission from the written poem is Shelley, who is just as closely associated with Lake Lemna as the other four authors named and to whom the reflections on fame also apply. He, too, is indirectly present through the reference to Mont Blanc (75-6) which alludes to Shelley's famous poem.

It is ironic that a poem which set out with the declared intention of finding an answer ends on a question which it refuses to answer. Browning's reader has thus again been duped, since for the author the poem never was an attempt at a complete self-revelation. However, the text makes amends for this very limited exposure of Browning's private self by revealing his process of composition and his complex attitude of mimetic rivalry with his predecessors in a spectacular ending which strikes an intriguing balance between the sublime and deflating irony. This tension reveals more about Browning the poet than about Browning the private man.

VI. SELF-OBSERVATION THROUGH JUXTAPOSITION WITH OTHER POETS

Through his theory of poetic influence, Harold Bloom has focused critical attention on Browning's self-definition in relation to Shelley. While agreeing with Bloom that the preoccupation with his difference from, or similarity to, this particular predecessor is central to Browning's self-conceptualisation, I want to stress the importance of other poets and abstract poetic types as means of his self-observation. This confrontation occurs on three levels.

Firstly, it can be restricted to the paratext of public statements and prefaces or private correspondence and conversation, as in the case of Browning's confrontation with Tennyson. Browning's public remarks about his most famous contemporary peer are generally deferential. In the preface to his selections in *Moxon's Miniature Poets* (1865), for instance, he alludes to Tennyson's selections in the same series earlier that year, saying that his own volume, 'a mere nosegay's worth', 'contentedly looks pale beside the wonderful flower-show of my illustrious predecessor – dare I say? my dear friend'. Browning's correspondence, however, also contains harsh censure of Tennyson's sensitivity to 'foolish criticism' in his revised editions of previously published works (13 July 1842 to Domett, *Corr.* 6: 32). Browning also condemns Tennyson's preference for the description of scenery over psychology in *The Holy Grail* (19 January 1870, McAleer *Blagden* 328-9). This mixture of admiration, envy and defiance of the vastly more popular Tennyson is never explicit in Browning's poetry. The closest he comes to a reference to Tennyson in the literary text is his choice of the title *Dramatic Idyls* for his collections of 1879 and 1880. The title neatly summarises his ambiguous feelings. At first sight, he seems to emulate the Laureate's *Idylls of the King* (1859), but he actually only draws the comparison in order to distinguish himself from Tennyson. In using the alternative spelling 'idyl' and adding the adjective 'dramatic', which had figured in *Dramatic Lyrics*, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* and *Dramatis Personae*, he stresses the difference between his own and Tennyson's approach.

Secondly, an entire poem can respond to or rewrite a poem by a contemporary. Thus it has been argued that there are intertextual links between 'Cleon' and Arnold's

‘Empedocles on Etna’ (Crawford), ‘Rabbi Ben Ezra’ and FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát* and, as already discussed, ‘Of Pacchiarotto’ and Alfred Austin’s poetry and criticism (see Chapter IV.2). A more complex variant of this are the poems in the *Parleyings* in which Browning’s historical ‘interlocutor’ stands for a contemporary.¹

Thirdly, poems make explicit reference to other poets and relate Browning’s view of them to his self-conceptualisation or his ideal of poetry. In this chapter, I will examine seven mature poems *in propria persona* – ‘Memorabilia’, ‘Cenciaja’, “‘Touch him ne’er so lightly...’”, ‘Thus I wrote in London...’, “‘Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books’”, the *Parleying* ‘With Christopher Smart’, and the ‘Prologue’ to *Asolando* – in which Browning employs various method of self-definition through the observation of different real or fictional poets. This final chapter of analysis thus constitutes a counterbalance to Chapter II on Browning’s dialectical self-definition in relation to one particular poet, EBB. Juxtaposition with other poets offers Browning the possibility to set up clear-cut oppositions, which reinforce his distinct artistic identity. But in these poems, as in the poems about EBB, the level of enunciation, and partially even the level of the enounced, renders the evaluation of the poetic concepts under discussion more complex. We will discover that Browning sometimes actually tries to liken himself to his apparent antagonist. As in the poems about EBB, too, Browning here conceptualises the genius of a poet through his subjective / objective dichotomy, but the objective mature Browning at times lauds the subjective type and at times strives to synthesise the objective / subjective opposition and advocates a mixed poetic ideal. Before tackling those poems whose divergences from the tenets of pure objective poetry have provoked critical commentary, I want to consider two of Browning’s clearest, but less famous, self-definitions as an objective poet through a juxtaposition with Shelley, ‘Memorabilia’ and ‘Cenciaja’. We will see how he uses the reference to the same poet in very different contexts as a means of promoting his own poetics and establishing a relation between objective and subjective poetry.

¹ Of these, the *Parleying* ‘With Gerard de Lairese’, alias Matthew Arnold, would be the most interesting for this analysis. Aware that I could not include all poems *in propria persona* on aesthetics in this study, I have excluded this poem because it does not discuss poetry explicitly and many of its ideas already feature in other poems, e.g. ‘Old Pictures in Florence’.

VI.1. Self-Definition as an Objective Poet in Relation to Shelley: 'Memorabilia' and 'Cenciaja'

Implicit references to Shelley can be traced throughout Browning's work,² whereas after his appearance as the epitome of the Romantic poet in *Pauline* and *Sordello*, explicit references to him are conspicuously absent. Notable exceptions are the 'Essay on Shelley', the passing reference in 'The Lost Leader', which focuses on Browning's evaluation of Wordsworth, 'Memorabilia' and 'Cenciaja'. 'Memorabilia', published in 1855 and dated 1853 on the manuscript, was written substantially later than *Sordello*, but not long before Browning began to annotate the Syracuse copy of *Sordello* in the winter of 1855-56 with a view to publishing a revised version of that poem. It is therefore possible that 'Memorabilia' reflects how Browning's mind was once more turning towards the poem in which Shelley figured so prominently as a foil for his own self-definition. 'Memorabilia' provides an alternative account to *Sordello* of Browning's transition to objective poetry, this time suggesting a causal connection between the first time he revised his view of Shelley and the revision of his own poetics. The poem's prominent position at the end of the first volume of *Men and Women* hints at its personal relevance.³ It is important to note that Browning's change in attitude was independent of the disillusioning revelations about Shelley's desertion of his first wife, of which he only heard a few years later.⁴ It is therefore exclusively Browning's own development which brings about a new perception of the idol of his youth.

The poem's most striking feature is its division into two units of two quatrains, which contrast in theme and tone. In stanzas i and ii, we see Browning, presumably as a very young man, coming unexpectedly close to his idol Shelley through meeting somebody who knew him. The scene is based on a real incident in Browning's life, although he later admitted in a letter to Buxton Forman that he had condensed the man

² 'England in Italy', for instance, contains a passage based on Browning's experience of a ride up Monte Calvano, which integrates a quotation from Shelley's 'Marengi', a borrowing which Browning acknowledges when recounting the autobiographical episode in a letter to EBB of 3 May 1845 (*Corr.* 10: 200; see Woolford and Karlin *Poems* 2: 342-3 and 349-50). For other intertextual references to Shelley, see the penultimate paragraph of my analysis of *La Saisiaz*, 'Thamuris Marching' in this chapter, Bloom's *Ringers* (Chapter 11), *Poetry and Repression* (Chapter 7) and *Map of Misreading* (Chapter 6) and Tucker's essay 'Memorabilia'.

³ Cf. 'One Word More', which is the last poem in the second volume of the original *Men and Women* and also closes the section of the same title in the *Poetical Works* of 1863.

⁴ In his effort to fix the date of this discovery, Raymond favours 1856 or 1858 (*Infinite Moment* 234-43).

who knew Shelley out of the bookseller who mentioned his acquaintance with Shelley and a friend who had accompanied him to Hodgson's bookstore and laughed at Browning's awed response to this episode (unpublished letter quoted in Jack and Meredith 5: 256). This prosaic scene is juxtaposed with a heavily symbolic vision on a moor in the other two quatrains. Lee Erickson explains the poem's bipartite structure as a proof of Browning's belief in the presence of the sublime in everyday life (140). For Erickson, both parts present private, subjective experiences of the divine, and Browning is 'grounding the transcendental moment in objective circumstance' (143), as a way of putting 'the infinite within the finite' (145).⁵

In my opinion, neither episode describes a sublime vision. Instead, they record Browning's loss of belief in the kind of vision which depends on the fusion of poet and poem into one. 'Memorabilia' expresses his realisation that Shelley, whom he had only a few months earlier, in 1852, proclaimed to be the exemplary subjective poet and – with some embarrassment caused by his atheism – potentially ideal man, is indeed no god. Browning expects a sort of epiphany through his indirect contact with Shelley the man, but his expectations are disappointed. His orientation towards objective poetry, which severs all links between man and work, is the consequence. The poem presents the same experience twice, from different points of view and in the different styles which correspond to Browning's new and old poetics respectively.⁶

In the episode in stanzas i and ii, both author and speaker are engaged in a self-observation. The author distances the experience by presenting it as a miniature dramatic monologue by his much younger self to the man who knew Shelley. The expletive 'Ah' on which the poem opens, the minute enumeration of the trivial stages of the interlocutor's encounter with Shelley and the paratactic syntax with the anaphoric repetition of 'And' at the beginning of lines 2, 3, 6 and 7 convey the naïve wonder of the speaker. But he becomes aware of a second order observer of his exclamation, the interlocutor, who expresses his evaluation of the speaker's hero worship through

⁵ Erickson is referring here to Browning's letter of 10 December 1855 to Ruskin (Collingwood 200).

⁶ 'Tray' employs a similar technique of matching theme and style. Its anonymous speaker juxtaposes samples of poems by two bards – parodies of William Morris's medievalism and the Byron of *Childe Harold* – with a third poet, who obviously stands for Browning. His poem recounts the story of a dog rescuing a drowning child. The enounced of his utterance thus promotes the ideal of altruism, which underlies Browning's poetics, while the enunciation illustrates Browning's poetic style through its contemporary subject, unpoetic diction and the use of direct speech, which stands for his preference for the dramatic monologue.

laughter. Via this detour, the speaker progresses to a critical self-observation in the second stanza, in which he reflects on his spontaneous reaction in the first. It begins to dawn on him that a personal acquaintance with Shelley would have no influence on his own life. This corresponds to the mature author's general realisation that the personality of a poet is separate from his work, which alone has an impact on the reader. This is, of course, a basic assumption of the operative closure of the modern, functionally differentiated art system and of objective poetry. The ironic exposure of the naivety of his younger self, the unlyrical Browningsque diction and the dramatic set-up here are all indications in the enunciation which demonstrate the author's transition to objective poetry.

Stanzas iii and iv rewrite the same experience from the point of view of the former, Romantic self and in the corresponding style. The symbolic vision has to be translated into real terms. The speaker's crossing of the gloomy enigmatic moor, whose name and use he does not understand, alludes to the Romantic quest *motif*. It stands for the speaker's high expectations of a sublime and significant vision of Shelley the man which are raised by his reading. But all he can get hold of is a moulted eagle-feather. There is almost unanimous agreement among critics that the eagle stands for Shelley, who is represented by a symbol drawn from his own poetry. The competition for identifying the precise source of this imagery ranges from the 'Ode to Liberty' (Pettigrew and Collins 1: 1128), *The Revolt of Islam* or *The Triumph of Life* (Tucker 'Memorabilia' 324) to Shelley's use of the eagle metaphor for Keats in 'Adonais' (Shen 9).⁷ The feather as a synecdoche of the idolised Romantic poet is hardly a substitute for the poet's self. The speaker's treasuring of the feather displays the nostalgic reluctance of Browning's younger self to accept that he can only access this tiny *pars pro toto*, the poetry, which is but a reminder of the absence of the whole, the man. The term 'moulted' implies development and maturation. Although it is ascribed to the eagle on

⁷ Yao Shen argues that the imagery was influenced by the many references to eagles quoted in Milnes's *Life*, the biography of Keats whose influence can also be discerned in 'Popularity'. For Shen, the second half of 'Memorabilia' is therefore about Browning being introduced to Keats's poetry through Shelley (13). I do not agree with Shen's claim that the poem contrasts the (ephemeral) influence of Shelley in the first half and the (long lasting) one of Keats (13-14), because the second episode, too, is quite clearly a disappointing one for the speaker, and the feather denotes absence. It is, however, not that relevant whether the intertextual reference to Keats is also intentional, because the poem is less specifically about Shelley than about Browning's conceptualisation of the Romantic poet, of whom Keats is another representative.

the level of the synecdoche's vehicle, it is more plausible that it refers not to Shelley's but to Browning's maturation in the tenor.

Thomas Walsh interprets the speaker's act of putting the feather 'inside [his] breast' (14) as a proof that Browning incorporates Shelley's essence into his own emotional life (37). This is in line with Bloom's theory, which posits that the inclusion of the predecessor is a necessary step towards a distinct poetic identity (*Map of Misreading* 121) and that the predecessor is obliquely present even in mature poems. In the 'Essay on Chatterton', Browning is perhaps simplistic when he situates the inclusion of the predecessor only in the poet's experiments with pastiche in his juvenilia. However, I would argue that in 'Memorabilia' the treasuring of the feather indicates no absorption of Shelley, in whatever distorted or unacknowledged form. The second half of the poem does integrate the predecessor, but Browning only adopts a Shelleyan voice to signal his overcoming of it.⁸ The objective style of the first half establishes clearly that his serious imitation of Shelley is over and that he has already moved beyond Romantic poetics. At first sight, the speaker of the first half seems to be more naïve than the speaker of the second half, but he displays a higher self-consciousness than the second speaker. Despite the temporal distance of retrospection implied in his use of the past tense, the second speaker has not yet taken the step to the detached self-observation of the first Browningsque half, which relieves the pain of disillusionment with self-directed irony. The matter-of-fact closing line, 'Well, I forget the rest', which in Gridley's words 'deflates' the Romantic inflation of the second scene (145), is the final unambiguous sign that his old poetics with their equation of man and work must be left behind and that a realist, colloquial style is the way forward for Browning.

While in 'Memorabilia' Shelley is used as an indicator of Browning's development, the engagement with the predecessor is more direct and complex in Browning's last direct reference to Shelley, which occurs after a long interval in 'Cenci', written and published in 1876. The poem's title puns on Shelley's drama *The Cenci* (1819), which the speaker claims to 'supplement' (23) with 'a rescued

⁸ The same principle is at work in the undoubtedly ironic quotation of the opening line of Shelley's 'A Lament', 'O world, O Life, O Time!', which Browning aged sixty-six wrote into the inside cover of his first copy of Shelley's *Miscellaneous Poems* (see the facsimile in Pottle after page 24).

anecdote' (18). In a letter to Buxton Forman, Browning explained the title and the Italian motto:

[...] 'aia' is generally an accumulative yet depreciative termination: 'Cenciaja' – a bundle of rags: a trifle. The proverb means 'every poor creature will be for pressing into the company of his betters,' and I used it to deprecate the notion that I intended anything of the kind. (27 July 1876, Hood 174)

Although we must bear in mind that Browning is not always reliable in his paratext, this is a fairly straightforward gesture of modesty. The enounced of the poem confirms this. Unlike the narrator in *Sordello*, who takes a similarly humble attitude, the speaker here does not oust Shelley from his audience but makes him his addressee. The two direct addresses, 'May I print, Shelley, [...]' and 'Shelley, may I [...]' (1 and 15), convey his feeling that he needs to ask the great master for permission to intrude upon the sanctity of his text. He portrays Shelley as the inspired artist, whereas he himself poses as a historiographer who recounts the legal precedent which moved the pope to refuse clemency to Beatrice Cenci, thus echoing his self-conceptualisation in *R&B*, which 'Cenciaja' resembles in so many respects.⁹ The manuscript version of the first half-line, 'May I tell, Poet', is even more indicative of this contrast between Browning and Shelley than the published version, 'May I print, Shelley'. Shelley's drama is a 'Titian, famed the wide world through' (22), while Browning merely 'illustrate[s Shelley's] superb / Achievement' (17-18) and writes 'little news' (30), 'No great things, only new and true beside' (19). Although Browning's denigration of his work is qualified by irony in the phrase 'only [...] true', the general message in the enounced is that his own poem will only be appreciated for its elucidation of the context of Shelley's text and makes no claim to an independent, let alone aesthetic, value.

This modest self-portrayal probably had an influence on Edward Dowden's evaluation that this 'interesting note on Shelley's *Cenci* [...] might, with no loss of effect, have been given in prose'.¹⁰ Kenneth Knickerbocker, whose article collates passages from Browning's source with the poem, comes to the same conclusion. He observes that Browning 'utilizes every detail in the manuscript' and 'places an almost air-tight restraint on his imagination', often merely translating the Italian text (392 and 400). He therefore agrees with Dowden in considering the poem as a valueless 'filler'

⁹ Shelley's drama is indeed a precursor to *R&B*, in the sense that the Procurator of the Poor Archangelis in the *OYB* cites the Cenci case as a precedent (Hodell ci-cii).

¹⁰ *Saturday Review* 42 (12 August 1876), p. 206, quoted by Knickerbocker (390).

(390). The few elaborations of the original story pointed out by Knickerbocker can indeed barely pass as creativity.

Does Browning in 'Cenci' really only portray himself as an unimaginative researcher who provides a footnote to Shelley's text, enlivened by a sideswipe at the corruption of the papal government, which echoes Shelley's position in the 'Preface' to *The Cenci* (Shelley *Poetical Works* 275)? A closer look at this preface and the dedication reveals a striking similarity between, on the one hand, Browning's self-portrayal in 'Cenci', his statements about the objective poet in the 'Essay on Shelley' and his literary method in *R&B* and, on the other hand, Shelley's own self-conceptualisation here. The preface reflects the concept of the dramatist as objective poet as Shelley might have encountered it through the mediation of Coleridge's lectures on poetry and drama in 1808-18, which drew on the Schlegels' criticism. Shelley opens and closes on the word 'manuscript', thereby underlining his claim to historical accuracy. Browning's reminders of the material presence of his manuscript in 'Cenci' parallel Shelley's framing device. He proclaims: 'Thus I unroll you then the manuscript' (38). And 'may I condense verbosity / That lies before me' (15-16) replaces the manuscript version 'I translate a manuscript'. Like Browning in *R&B* (I, 423), Shelley also reports on his 'research trips' to see the Cenci Palace and Guido Reni's painting of Beatrice Cenci, which he describes in detail (278). After his research, 'Nothing remained as I imagined, but to clothe it to the apprehensions of my countrymen in such language and action as would bring it home to their hearts' (276).¹¹ The diction of this sentence recalls Browning's objective poet, who reproduces 'things external [...] with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men' and who is 'so acquainted and in sympathy with its [i.e. the average mind's] narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole' ('Essay on Shelley' 1001). From Browning's objective poet the reader learns only 'the fact itself' and not how the poet 'conceived of that fact as he beheld it in completeness, how he accounted for it, under what known law he registered its nature, or to what unknown law he

¹¹ In his letters and prefaces, Shelley describes himself as an author with a dual genius who adapts his style, subject matter and genre to the kind of audience which he wants to reach. He composes, on the one hand, works with 'beautiful idealisms of moral excellence' for 'the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers' ('Preface' to *Prometheus Unbound*, *Poetical Works* 207) and, on the other hand, more accessible texts, like *The Cenci*, 'written for the multitude' (Jones *Letters* 2: 174).

traced its coincidence' (*ibid.*). Similarly, Shelley states in his dedication that he presents 'sad reality' and lays 'aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor' (*Poetical Works* 275). In the preface, he insists that his characters are not used as his mouthpieces: 'I have endeavoured as nearly as possible to represent the characters as they probably were, and have sought to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true' (277). He remarks, moreover, that he has avoided 'what is commonly called mere poetry' (*ibid.*) and instead employed 'the real language of men in general' (278), possibly echoing Wordsworth in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. This recalls Browning's distinction between Shelley's poetry and his own prose-like account in the phrase: 'Who lauds your poem lends an ear to me / Relating how [...]' ('Cenciaja' 31-2).

Considered in relation to the preface and dedication to *The Cenci*, 'Cenciaja' thus presents a contradictory relation between the two textual levels. Whereas the enounced stresses Browning's difference from and inferiority to the great imaginative genius of Shelley, the intertextual echoes in the enunciation reveal a similarity to Shelley, not in his quality as a subjective poet – to which we are so accustomed in Browning – but exceptionally as an objective poet, as Shelley chooses to portray himself in his preface and dedication. In the 'Essay on Shelley', Browning had already singled out 'the unrivalled "Cenci"' together with 'Julian and Maddalo' and the 'Ode to Naples' as 'successful instances of objectivity in Shelley' (1012). The reference occurs in a context where Browning states quite clearly the superiority of the subjective striving for a union of the actual and the ideal – even if only a 'sublime fragmentary essay' – over works like *The Cenci*, which are 'utterly perfect in a lower moral point of view, under the mere conditions of art'.¹² For 'Cenciaja' Browning must also have consulted Shelley's dedication and preface, and it is unlikely he would not have been aware that the self-conceptualisation of his hitherto unattainable predecessor for once coincided with his own. Browning might thus have seized the opportunity to overcome what Bloom calls his 'guilt and shame' at not being able to follow his ideal (*Poetry and*

¹² Gibson suggests that Browning may have borrowed his characterisation of the subjective poet as carrying pictures "on the retina of his own eyes" from Shelley's statement in the dedication to *The Cenci* that he paints 'with such colours as my own heart furnishes, that which has been' ('Essay on Shelley' 1002; *Poetical Works* 275; *History* 297, n.53). This conclusion is not convincing, since Shelley so clearly presents himself as an objective poet here. He claims merely to add colouring to the events he records, whereas Browning's subjective poet 'does not paint pictures' but appropriates what he sees and makes it part of his body.

Repression 178). Having suffered throughout his career from an inability to equal Shelley the subjective poet, he can for once keep up with Shelley and 'press into the company of his better' when he presents himself as an objective poet. One could even argue that through the strong restraint on his imagination in 'Cenciaja', Browning has outdone Shelley's self-conceptualisation in the preface to *The Cenci* as far as historical exactness is concerned. Nevertheless, since the similarity to Shelley's preface is not spelled out in the enounced, 'Cenciaja' is a much less triumphant effort to out-Shelley Shelley than 'Thamuris Marching', probably Browning's only successful performance in Shelley's visionary, lyrical mode, in that it combines a Shelleyan landscape, joy, *terza rima* reminiscent of the 'Ode to the West Wind' and assurance of purpose (Bloom *Poetry and Repression* 201-4).¹³ In contrast, 'Cenciaja' can only succeed in a very oblique way by imitating an untypically objective Shelley.

In a more obvious way, 'Cenciaja' also signals that Browning equals Shelley as an imaginative creator. The insistence on the intertextuality with *The Cenci* in the enounced cannot disguise the constant reference to Browning's own *R&B* which is implicit in the subject matter and manner of presentation. The inverted parallel between the Franceschini case and the Santa Croce plot in 'Cenciaja', in which the pope is unjust and the convicted aristocrat is innocent, lets 'Cenciaja' appear as a playful reversal of *R&B*. The allusion to *R&B* in the enunciation is a hint that the speaker's humble deference to Shelley is false modesty. In a poem of epic length and unsuspected popularity, whose good reviews contrasted with the scathing contemporary reviews of *The Cenci*, Browning had already proven that he could match Shelley's genius in converting historical facts into great imaginative poetry. The praise of Shelley is therefore perhaps only a disingenuous pretext to draw attention to Browning's own recent success. The indications that Browning equals Shelley may be quite hidden, but for the reader who is familiar with his literary development, the return to the comparison with Shelley and the ostentations self-deprecation of the mature, and by

¹³ However, the celebration of the Shelleyan lyrical mode is ambiguous, since Thamuris' song breaks off just before his blinding, the punishment for his boast that he surpasses the Muses. His visionary poetic faculty is thus punished through his being deprived of his literal vision. Moreover, the song is part of Aristophanes' speech in *Aristophanes' Apology*. Aristophanes' insistence that he wants to avoid the same fate as Thamuris betrays his awareness of how precarious the stance of the visionary is. Aristophanes seems to voice Browning's fear of such a fall from the heights of visionary power (Karlin 'Figure of the Singer' 117). Sordello, Christopher Smart, and René Gentilhomme in *The Two Poets of Croisic* are other poets who illustrate this fall. See also the next section.

now more successful and confident, Browning in the enounced call out for a more scrupulous examination of the his self-portrayal here.

VI.2. The Confrontation With the Ideal of the Poet as Singer

The juxtaposition of two opposed poetic types, which we have seen in ‘Cenciaja’, is also the theme of the epilogue to the second series of *Dramatic Idyls*, “‘Touch him ne’er so lightly...’” (1880); but here, too, a close analysis shows that the opposition is less clear-cut than it at first appears. The poem presents the type of the poet as singer and a second poet, who appears to be Browning’s unacknowledged self-portrayal, and makes a strong point in favour of the latter. It has been pointed out by DeVane that the preference expressed in this poem is not reconcilable with such poems as ‘Transcendentalism’ or the *Parleying* ‘With Christopher Smart’, whose purpose seems to be to elevate the ideal of the poet as singer (*Handbook* 458). Two explanations of this contradiction have been put forward. In accordance with the ‘Two Brownings Theory’ advocated by Altick (‘Private Life’) and Herron, this fascination with the singer can be explained as a retrogressive element in the mature Browning, the manifestation of a perennial nostalgia for his earlier abandoned Romantic ideal, which gets more pronounced in old age. Another explanation is that in some poems, as just seen in ‘Memorabilia’, the subjective ideal is presented as Browning’s retrospective observation of his Romantic phase and that the poem juxtaposes his younger and older selves. Pettigrew and Collins speculate on this with reference to “‘Touch him ne’er so lightly...’” (2: 1084), and Altick posits the same with reference to ‘Transcendentalism’ (‘Browning’s “Transcendentalism”’ 24). The change from the past tense in the first five lines of “‘Touch him ne’er so lightly...’”, which characterise the singer-poet, to the present tense in the second half about the other poet may support Pettigrew and Collins’s view that the poem portrays successive stages in Browning’s development. The metaphor of song for poetry in *Pauline* (e.g. 76-9, 154, 222, 258) and the songs by his characters in *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* suggest indeed that the lyric was the young Browning’s ideal. The only truly lyrical poem *in propria persona* which he published was ‘Still ailing, wind?...’, from which, as we have seen in Chapter III.1, he later distanced himself. In view of this change in poetics, it is not surprising that in ‘Thus I wrote in London...’ Browning later denied that there was *any* self-reference in “‘Touch

him ne'er so lightly...”, claiming that it presented ‘Poets dead and gone’ (2).

I will question the credibility of this claim below. I want to suggest instead that the second poet is indeed an unacknowledged self-portrayal, but that Browning’s neat categorisation of himself on the surface of “Touch him ne'er so lightly...” hides a more complex conceptualisation of his *present* self, which can be detected through a look at ‘Thus I wrote in London...’. Similarly, I intend to show that ‘Transcendentalism’ and ‘With Christopher Smart’ do not simply celebrate the subjective poet, but break up and rearrange Browning’s objective / subjective dichotomy as it is stated in the ‘Essay on Shelley’.

The structure of “Touch him ne'er so lightly...” indicates that it is the kind of playful educative poem which Browning also used in *Pacchiarotto* and which first encourages the reader to take a certain stance and then dismantles it (see Chapter IV). The lyric poet, who composes his songs effortlessly, is presented in the corresponding style: the rhythm progresses rapidly, eliding the central consonant in ‘ne'er’; three compounds condense meaning (‘quick-receptive’, ‘feather-seed’, ‘flower-dust’); and many alliterations suggests harmonious unity. This impression is reinforced by the organic metaphor of the poet as a fertile soil from which poems grow like plants. It alludes to the parable of the sower recorded in Matthew xiii, 3-23, Mark iv, 2-20 and Luke viii, 4-15, which illustrates the different ways of absorbing the Gospel. As opposed to the seeds which are eaten by birds or fall upon rocks or thorns, the seeds which are sown upon the good ground are ‘such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred’ (Mark iv, 20). The description of this poet ends on the confident conclusion that his poetic fertility and spontaneity ‘prove a poet-soul!’ (5).

However, the poem’s second half – in a ponderous style, with hard consonants, more monosyllables and ending on a slant rhyme (‘age’ / ‘rage’ / ‘heritage’) – forces the reader to reconsider his positive impression of the first poet.¹⁴ The whole formal set-up of the poem is designed to support the superiority of the second poet. The first poet is presented through the direct speech of an unidentified speaker, whose authority is therefore dubitable. His view is commented on by the speaker of the poem, who is

¹⁴ A reader familiar with *Sordello* might already become suspicious while reading the poem’s first half. It is reminiscent of the description of Sordello’s creativity, which is referred to with the pun ‘loose fertility’ (I, 471). The vegetation imagery which is used to describe Sordello’s imagination in this passage is full of premonitions of decay and decadence.

situated on a higher narrative level, which seems to imply a superior point of view. Moreover, the ten-line poem does not give the two opposed views exactly the same space, since the direct speech breaks off in line five and the last word of the line already switches to the second speaker. The missing foot in the first speaker's utterance suggests that his view is not complete and calls for a response, which also closes the rhyme scheme of his speech. The rhyme is completed by the ironic rhetorical question 'Indeed?', which undermines all that was said before. And whereas the first poetic concept is personalised and represented by one exemplary poet, who is referred to with the pronoun 'he', the second concept is presented in an impersonal way and authoritatively posited as the only possible definition of a great poet.

In referring to the second poet as a rock, the poem also takes up the allusion to the parable of the sower, but reverses it. The parable states:

But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. (Matthew xiii, 20-1)

Browning's speaker, by contrast, pictures the rock as the soil from which slowly but surely grows a poet who is 'a pine, a nation's heritage' (10). The confident reversal of the parable here recalls 'Shop' with its reversal of the biblical '[...] for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matthew vi, 21) in the phrase: 'From where these sorts of treasures are, / There should our hearts be – Christ, how far!' (109-10). The reversal in "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...'" suggests that the second poet is Browning's self-reference, since it fits perfectly into his self-conceptualisation as the unacknowledged precursor of a new poetic tradition in some of the *Pacchiarotto* poems (see Chapter IV.4). It also agrees with his modest but confident self-portrayal as a rock in a letter to EBB of 6 March 1846:

Now, you *call* the rock, a rock [...] It *is* a rock; and may be quite barren of good to you, – not large enough to build houses on, not small enough to make a mantelpiece of, much less a pedestal for a statue, – but it *is* real rock, that is all. (*Corr.* 12: 133)

EBB's reply takes up the imagery with reference to the parable of the sower and points towards Browning's use of it in "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...": 'So my rock.. may the birds drop into your crevices the seeds of all the flowers of the world [...]' (*Corr.* 12: 136). These letters thus seem to confirm that the second poet is indeed an

unacknowledged self-reference.

There are two other, more hidden biblical allusion which justify the positive reference to the rock in the poem: the rock is a metaphor for Christ. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians x, 4 spells out a typological exegesis of Moses' miracle of Meribah, which is an alternative to the interpretation of Moses as the Old Testament type of Christ and which Browning uses for his self-presentation in *Sordello* and 'One Word More': '[...] they [the Israelites in the desert] drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.' The water prefigures the literal blood flowing from Christ's side during the crucifixion, and its physical refreshment stands for the spiritual redemption of mankind through his self-sacrifice. Christ also uses the rock as an analogy for himself, when he tells the parable of the man who built on rock and man who built on sand (Matthew vii, 24-7; Luke vi, 47-9). The latter stands for those who do not listen to Christ, and the former for those who do. In picturing the second poet as a rock, Browning therefore conveys a self-image as the solid foundation of a new poetic era. By implication, it is of similar importance for the reading public to listen to Browning, the redeemer of the poetic tradition, as it is for mankind to listen to Christ. Chapters II.3 and IV have shown how vital the reception of his work is for Browning's self-image. It is therefore not surprising that he chooses to draw on two parables which deal with the issue of reception, when Christ, like an author, is engaged in self-conscious metacommentaries on the medium he uses and his concern to have an audience. The parable of the sower is, moreover, the occasion on which Christ reflects on his use of the genre of the parable and on the general conditions and difficulties of absorbing the Gospel. The comparison with Christ is thus no far-fetched hubris but a result of the analogy between Christ's situation and that of the unacknowledged author.

Browning's problem is, though, that he cannot justify his indirect claim to being the future national poet by referring to the quality of his poetry. "Touch him ne'er so lightly..." does not spell out explicitly what the compositions of the second poet are like. Line 6 states that 'Rock's the song-soil rather', but assuming that there is the same correspondence between the nature of the works of the poet who is described and the enunciation of the passage as in the lines about the first poet, the second poet is no melodious singer but has a Browningsque, vigorous style. His superiority is only founded on his lack of immediate public acclaim and his ability to compose under onerous conditions. As in the 'Epilogue' to *Pacchiarotto*, Browning's prediction of his

future success is suspect. His recognition that the second poet was a thinly disguised self-image and that he was making a pretentious claim which he could not possibly prove seems to have been the reason why he afterwards felt the need to deny the self-reference in 'Thus I wrote in London...'. This poem was spontaneously composed on 14 October 1880 and written into what appears to have been Edith Bronson's autograph book, beneath a transcript of "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...'", whose form it duplicates (Peterson *Trumpeter* 62).

In this metatextual comment on "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...'", Browning acknowledges that the place of a poet in the literary tradition can only be evaluated by posterity and identifies the second poet as Dante. He contrasts the critics' accusation that he was making arrogant claims with his humility:

Thus I wrote in London, musing on my betters,
Poets dead and gone: and lo, the critics cried,
'Out on such a boast!' – as if I dreamed that fetters
Binding Dante, bind up – me! as if true pride
Were not also humble! (1-5)

The inadequacy of a comparison between Dante and himself is highlighted by the exclamation '– me!' after the caesura. Yet the paradoxical after-thought 'as if true pride / Were not also humble!' shows that his stance is not wholly self-deprecating. Moreover, the first line recalls the motto for 'Cenciaja', in which Browning claims that he does not intend to press 'into the company of his betters', whereas my analysis has shown that in that poem he surreptitiously does try to do so. The repeated use of the phrase here adds to the suspicion that the enounced is not reliable and that the author is once more tongue-in-cheek and does compare himself to a prestigious predecessor.

Still under the cover of a highly complimentary and humble discourse, the second half of the poem attempts a description of Browning's composition of the poem itself:

So I smiled and sighed
As I oped your book in Venice this bright morning,
Sweet new friend of mine! and felt the clay or sand
– Whatsoe'er my soil be, – break – for praise or scorning –
Out in grateful fancies – weeds, but weeds expand
Almost into flowers – held by such a kindly hand! (5-10)

Surprisingly, the choice of words in the enunciation reveals that Browning's self-conceptualisation here comes much closer to the first poet in "'Touch him ne'er so

lightly...” than to the second one. Browning is certainly no barren rock like the second poet. He calls his poetry ‘weeds’, in contrast to the flowers of the first poet and the pine tree of the second poet. In the parable of the weeds, which follows the parable of the sower in Matthew xiii, 24-30, the tares are sown by the devil. But Browning’s weeds expand ‘Almost into [the] flowers’ of the singer-poet. His closeness to that type is emphasised by the verb ‘break’, which echoes a key word in the first line of “Touch him ne’er so lightly, into song he broke...”. The account of the genesis of ‘Thus I wrote in London...’, which is inscribed within the poem itself, implies that Browning does have the ability to compose spontaneously, like the singer-poet. So, after intimating in “Touch him ne’er so lightly...” that he is the toiling precursor poet, Browning is now hinting that he can also approach the spontaneous, inspired poet. This is a claim which he never made in his public poetry. However, in the unpublished paratext to three poems, he posed as an inspired poet: in imitation of Coleridge’s prefatory note to ‘Kubla Khan’, he claimed in a note on the first proof of the fragment ‘Artemis Prologizes’ (dated 1841) that he had composed it in a fit of fever, but had forgotten the end by the time he was well enough to write it down (Orr 121); similarly, he stated in a letter to Furnivall that he was interrupted by a sort of person from Porlock when writing the ‘Flight of the Duchess’ (15 April 1883, Peterson *Trumpeter* 70-1); and ‘Childe Roland’ ‘came upon [him] as a kind of dream’ (Whiting 261).

After the unauthorised publication of a facsimile of both poems from the autograph book in the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* of November 1882, Browning wrote two letters in order to deter Furnivall from publishing ‘Thus I wrote in London...’ again in the *Browning Society’s Papers*. By way of explaining why he wanted to prevent its republication, he wrote on 9 December 1882: ‘The poem, as a thing for the purpose it was written for [sic], is *spoiled* by this excrescence, – though suitable enough for the young Lady’s purpose’ (Peterson *Trumpeter* 61). The first sense of this sentence which comes to mind is that ‘this excrescence’ is ‘Thus I wrote in London...’ and that ‘This poem’ must mean “Touch him ne’er so lightly...”. This reading assumes that Browning made an error in deixis, since the text mentioned in the previous and in the following sentences and to which ‘This poem’ should logically refer is ‘Thus I wrote in London...’. Or he does not accord ‘Thus I wrote in London...’ the status of a literary text, i.e. it is not a ‘poem’. This would be in keeping with Browning’s general policy of not presenting his private, *ad hoc* compositions of

occasional poems side by side with his 'official' poetry in the public domain. If we assume the reference to be grammatically correct and 'This poem' to mean 'Thus I wrote in London...', 'this excrescence' could refer to the act of publishing that poem.

Whatever the precise sense of this sentence, Browning was obviously concerned that what had been intended as a private communication to a specific addressee – a mere 'young Lady' for whose purpose it was 'suitable enough' – had without his consent been turned into a public text. He had thus for the first time inadvertently been provoked to respond directly to criticism on a particular poem within his own poetry, and to make matters worse, a poem about his self-conceptualisation.¹⁵ Even in *Pacchiarotto* he had not condescended to such a specific interaction with his critics, as the collection only engaged with the criticism of his general poetics and style. 'Thus I wrote in London...' lacks the double observation of himself and the critics' aesthetic categories which characterises the *Pacchiarotto* poems. This ironic confrontation with his critics redeems Browning's problematic self-portrayal in that collection, whereas 'Thus I wrote in London...' only presents a rather unconvincing disclaimer about the self-reference in "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...". Moreover, the poem sketches out a self-image which may lay Browning open to attack, because he is now found to come too close to the inspired singer-poet of "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...'", whom he does not resemble much and to whom he chooses not to liken himself in his published poetry. In trying to withhold the poem from further publication, he apparently hoped to abort this more direct engagement with his critics in which he was only on the defensive without launching a simultaneous attack on their standards. The offer he made to Furnivall in exchange for the suppression of the poem indicates how eager he was to avoid any self-revelation. He promised to 'reward [Furnivall] for [his] complacency' by providing the most impersonal information possible: a list of the real names of characters and places in *RCNCC* (9 December 1882, Peterson *Trumpeter* 61-2). Of course, Furnivall with his keenness to collect personal statements from his poet considered this a poor substitute and went ahead with the publication.

Considered together, the two poems thus suggest that Browning would like to see himself as a poet who possesses multiple abilities, including the potential for spontaneous, lyrical composition, although the enounced of "'Touch him ne'er so

¹⁵ Bluphocks's derision of the poet's 'cramp couplets' in *Pippa Passes* (I, 292) seems to echo Landor's critique of *Sordello*, but the reference is not acknowledged (see Chapter III.2).

lightly...” so demonstratively repudiates the lyrical poet. In contrast, “‘Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books’” (1855) explicitly advocates poetry as song. The poem bears the title of a projected work by the younger poet whom it addresses and which is diametrically opposed to lyricism. The title certainly intends to parody the discursive and meditative strand in Romantic poetry. Drew reminds us that the fourteen-book *Prelude*, whose existence had long been known, had only been published in 1850 (440, n. 6). Browning himself had somewhat emulated this mode in the discursive passages within his poem ‘Sordello, in Six Books’, as he described it in an advertisement in *Strafford*. In his essay on the poem, Altick cites reviews of *Sordello*, *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* and *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* in the *Athenaeum* and the *Examiner* which label these poems pejoratively as obscure ‘transcendentalism’ (‘Browning’s “Transcendentalism”’ 24-5). Carlyle, and in particular his injunctions that Browning had better write in prose,¹⁶ has been put forward as another model for the addressee’s prosaic style (DeVane *Handbook* 275). But as Altick demonstrates, the speaker – apparently an older poet, who rebukes the younger poet for his style – also resembles Carlyle in that he echoes Carlyle’s views on the function of poetry, which shaped Browning’s own aesthetics. The Carlylean influence on both speaker and addressee and the ‘transcendental’ reputation of Browning’s early poetry suggest that the poem is less an engagement with the aesthetics of others than with the evolution of his own.

There is, of course, no clear indication that the poem is *in propria persona* and a self-portrait, but its position at the head of the ‘Men, and Women’ group in the *Poetical Works*, as a counterbalance to the last poem in the group, ‘One Word More’, indicates that it has a personal relevance. I agree with Altick’s view that the speaker is Browning ‘addressing himself, or, more specifically, the poet that he has been down to the age of forty’ (‘Browning’s “Transcendentalism”’ 24). In a way similar to *Sordello*, Browning has recourse to the method of splitting himself into two distinct characters who represent different stages of his development, with the more mature self observing the younger self. The confrontation of the two allows Browning to dramatise the

¹⁶ See Carlyle’s letter of 21 June 1841 to Browning (*Corr.* 5: 65). By the time Browning wrote ‘Transcendentalism’, Carlyle had already changed his mind on the subject. In a letter of 8 March 1852, he asked Browning to ‘give us a right stroke of work [...]. Nor do I restrict you to Prose, in spite of all I have said and still say: Prose or Poetry, either of them you can master; [...] in whatever form your own *Daimon* bids’ (Carlyle *Letters* 293).

moment at which he decides to abandon abstract meditation and to write “Lyrics,” with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see’ (letter of 24 February 1854 to Milsand, Bentzon 115).

The observation of Browning’s development sets in at an even earlier stage, when the speaker sketches out a generalised evolution of man. At the first stage,

Boys seek for images and melody,
[...]
Objects throng our youth, ’t is true;
We see and hear and do not wonder much [...] (17, 19-20)

The assumption that the child is gifted with the faculty of an unconscious perception of meaning, which it loses as it grows up, stems directly from Romantic theory. Bristow (14-17) traces striking parallels between ‘Transcendentalism’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’. We can guess that this was also the developmental route Browning took. The youth’s first responses to Shelley’s poetry, which can be inferred from the markings and scribblings in his first copy of Shelley’s *Miscellaneous Poems*, suggest that ‘images and melody’, i.e. mastery of language and lyricism, were indeed the outstanding qualities for which he first admired Shelley (Maynard 200). This taste also shaped his first own poetic endeavours. On 8 November 1843, he wrote to Domett: ‘[...] the fact is, in my youth (i.e. childhood) I wrote *only* musically – and after stopped all that so effectually that I even now catch myself grudging my men and women their half-lines, like a parish overseer the bread-dole of his charge’ (*Corr.* 8: 39). Apparently, Browning only later learned to appreciate the intellectual quality of Shelley’s poetry and accordingly imitated this aspect in his own compositions. This shift from musical poetry to an admiration of Shelley’s thought is also described in the obliquely autobiographical *Pauline* (357-428). In ‘Transcendentalism’, this second stage is represented by the addressee, the younger poet, who assumes that ‘Men must have reason’ (18) and ‘Stark-naked thought’ (10). Browning realises at the next stage, represented by the speaker, that the mature man does not need abstract thought but wants to recover the faculty of immediate experience. This is again in line with the Wordsworthian desire to recover the child’s unmediated union with nature.

The speaker presents three ways in which poetry tries to recover this original state, which we have already encountered in the hierarchy of poetry in *Sordello*. The

addressee comes close to the worst poets, who ‘say they so have seen’ (*Sordello* III, 840). He lays claim to transcendental, abstract insight but cannot mediate it. Jacob Boehme, who can ‘tell us what they [the objects we see and hear] mean, indeed!’ (21), represents the better poets who say ‘what it is they saw’ (*Sordello* III, 841). He can convey his experience of communication with nature, but the reader cannot share it, and by the time he has read the book, he finds ‘life’s summer past’ (33). John of Halberstadt, ‘who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about’ (38), recreates the original experience in the reader. Like the best poets, he ‘Impart[s] the gift of seeing to the rest’ (*Sordello* III, 842).

There is, however, a different emphasis in ‘Transcendentalism’ which distinguishes it from *Sordello*: the ideal poet must be a singer. But despite this insistence here and in the other mature poems analysed in this section, none of these poems makes much of the musical quality of his compositions – in contrast to *Paracelsus*, *Sordello* and *Pippa Passes*, which all include songs. Instead, the mature poems here stress that the ideal poet should not just be a ‘Maker-see’, but has himself the strong visionary faculty which is traditionally associated with the lyric poet through the ancient *vates*. This is, of course, a distinctive feature of the subjective poet in the ‘Essay on Shelley’, which uses the ‘seer’ as a synonym for this type. John of Halberstadt connects the subjective and the objective genius in that he proceeds from visions of the natural world (the domain of the objective poet) to a communication with heaven (the aspiration of the subjective poet), thereby ‘Pouring heaven into this shut house of life’ (45). Despite his objective method of recreating experience, John of Halberstadt is therefore not, as Drew thinks (45), a purely objective poet. On the contrary, Browning experiments with the ingredients of subjective and objective poetry, trying to dissolve the apparently so rigid dichotomy he set up as recently as in 1852, when not a combination of subjective and objective poetry in the same work, but a poet’s ability to create both purely subjective and objective works had been the highest ideal (‘Essay on Shelley’ 1003).

This mixed ideal is called into question in two ways. Firstly, John of Halberstadt is suspect because his ‘brace of rhymes’ (39) is the spell of a mage. Both before and after ‘Transcendentalism’, Browning portrays the creativity of mages as decadent and dangerous: the archimage in *Sordello* (III, 579-91) conjures up his gaudy transcendental platan to impress his audience and indulge his desire for self-display, and

the mage in *R&B* (I, 742-59) attempts to animate a patchwork of body parts in the hope of equalling divine creativity.

Secondly, in the enounced, the speaker displays such a strong confidence that he knows what distinguishes good poetry that we are challenged to search for blind spots in the enunciation. Ironically, his exhortations to his addressee to be lyrical are not mirrored by the form of most of his own utterance. I think Bristow is a little too harsh in his verdict: 'All too conspicuously, he does not practise what he preaches' (17). Lines 40-5 seem to me a fine attempt at recreating the experience of John of Halberstadt's vision. But the greater part of the poem is very prosaic. The speaker himself admits that he does not sing, when he says: 'May a brother speak? / 'T is you speak, that's your error' (1-2). One could of course argue that the poem is unlyrical because it is meant to represent an utterance in a dialogue situation and not a poem. But if he had wanted to portray his speaker as a singer, Browning could still have chosen a more songlike metre and rhyme to demonstrate his lyrical potential rather than blank verse, the metre which comes closest to prose. His energetic style and the elliptical syntax make it difficult to see how the same speaker could turn into a singer. We are hence left with the suspicion that the ideal poem cannot be composed by either the addressee or the speaker. Once more, the enounced is subverted through Romantic Irony in the enunciation. Browning's critical self-observation thus operates on two levels: the more mature self (the speaker) mocks the poetics of the younger self (the addressee), and the author calls into question the new poetics of the speaker.

Published thirty-two years later, the *Parleying* 'With Christopher Smart' returns to the theme of the lyrical recreator of experience.¹⁷ After having ruled out in 'Transcendentalism' that he can himself achieve the mixed subjective and objective ideal, Browning now develops the concept with reference to another poet, or rather two poets, Smart and David, since the poem celebrates Smart's 'Song to David', which praises and emulates David's Psalms. This set-up resembles the *mise en abîme* of poets writing about poets in *Sordello*, but it is unmistakably clear that Browning here defines himself in opposition to Smart and David. He does not present himself in the role of a

¹⁷ The poem is obviously the late expression of an admiration Browning had felt for a long time. Browning told Furnivall on 4 March 1887 that he had known the poem by heart for 'nearly fifty years' (Peterson *Trumpeter* 145). *Paracelsus* I, 781-5 refers to the 'Song to David', and Paracelsus' long speech at the end of Part V is reminiscent of it. Moreover, Browning said he reread the poem in the year he published 'Saul', which also imitates Smart's style (Pettigrew and Collins 1:1135, no source given).

poet but in that of a fascinated reader. In a manner reminiscent of Keats's 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', the poem uses a travel metaphor – a walk through the house of Smart's work – to describe the speaker's experience of his initial response to the 'Song'. The syntax of the first verse paragraph conveys his bafflement: after the false start 'It seems as if... or did [...]', which is a first token of his difficulty at verbalising his experience, the rest of the paragraph is a succession of confused questions, interrupted by an excited exclamation. The speaker insists that he is unable to express his emotion at reading Smart's poem, and after an effort at imitating Smart's style in lines 195–8, he summarises what distinguishes him from Smart with the juxtaposition 'My prose – your poetry' (199).¹⁸ This self-deprecation highlights the merits of Smart, who has no problem expressing the inexpressible.

As in the portrayal of John of Halberstadt in 'Transcendentalism', the nature of Smart's 'Song' is lauded as a symbiosis of subjective and objective poetry: like the subjective *vates*, Smart is suddenly inspired and dons the prophet's 'flame-robe' (84) and the 'singing-dress' (112); and like the objective poet, Smart chooses for his subject matter the real, natural world. He becomes a 'Maker-see' who creates for the reader the illusion of an unmediated experience, so that 'with me first glance / Was but full recognition' (8-9). But since earth is the manifestation of God, Smart can proceed from an objective theme to a subjective vision of the divine and the Word:

Smart, solely of such songmen, pierced the screen
'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul [...] (113-14)

[...] there fell
Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
Naked [...] (140-2)

Smart's direct access to an absolute, capitalised 'Truth', along with several biblical echoes, is strongly reminiscent of Carlylean transcendentalism. It contrasts sharply with most of Browning's mature poetry with its switch to second order observation, the awareness of the problems of mediation and the impossibility of ascertaining absolute values.

There are, however, three restrictions which undermine Smart's poem as a model. Firstly, as in the case of John of Halberstadt, the status of the model poet is

¹⁸ This echoes the claim in the manuscript version of 'Cenciája' (quoted above) that Browning is not a 'Poet' like Shelley.

suspect. Unlike Lazarus in the 'Epistle of Karshish', Smart does not lose his wits through divine revelation, but is already insane before it occurs. The quality and origin of his ecstatic vision might therefore be questionable. The other two restrictions relate to the balance of objective and subjective poetry: the subjective element is not stable because inspiration cannot be sustained, and there is a danger of the objective element becoming too dominant.

Browning's actual motivation for the utterance is less to express his overwhelming reading experience than to voice his surprise that Smart could only assume the vatic stance in a single poem. The uniqueness of inspiration is a frequent concern throughout Browning's career. Like Smart, René Gentilhomme in *The Two Poets of Croisic* is only inspired once in his lifetime.¹⁹ And as mentioned above, Browning had claimed that he had also experienced unstable moments of inspiration. The very short efforts at imitating Smart's style (195-8) and John of Halberstadt's vision ('Transcendentalism' 40-5) illustrate Browning's difficulty at rising to and sustaining this kind of poetry. Of course, the 'Song to David' does not come as a complete surprise to the student of Smart's poetry. Familiar as he clearly was with Smart's overall work (DeVane *Browning's Parleyings* 93), and even though Smart's other great visionary poem, 'Jubilate Agno', was as yet unpublished, Browning must have seen that the style of the 'Song' was foreshadowed in Smart's Seatonian prize poems, and even more in his *Translation of the Psalms of David*. Browning also makes an unhistorical equation of the period of Smart's insanity, which spread in fact over most of his life, and the composition of the 'Song'. It is therefore quite clear that Browning is consciously bending the facts to support his theory of a unique moment of inspiration, which implies that the 'Song' cannot possibly stand as a realistic model for other poets, who would at best be able to attain it once.

Let us now turn to Smart's excess on the objective side. After the extensive praise of his recreation of the natural world, lines 208ff. suddenly reproach him for only showing men 'strength and beauty' and then failing to combine this with a didactic purpose. The role of poetry is summarised thus:

Nature was made to be by Man enjoyed
 First; followed duly by enjoyment's fruit,
 Instruction – haply leaving joy behind [...] (225-7)

¹⁹ Cf. also the emphasis on the uniqueness of 'One Word More' and the precarious experience of Thamuris, which cannot be repeated either.

In this passage and in stating that the poet's 'function is to rule – / By thought incite to deed' (232-3), Browning is again being surprisingly unmodern and contradicts his positive presentation of Fra Lippo Lippi's undidactic realism. However, the conservative didacticism which is so typical of the ageing Browning can in this case be explained as a strong reaction, called forth by the exaggeration of the objective character in his Aestheticist contemporaries, who were accused of completely excluding the moral dimension from poetry and to whom Browning seems to be alluding at this point.

Moreover, the didactic tone of this passage is immediately counterbalanced by an even more vigorous attack on a tendency in Victorian poetry which is diametrically opposed to nihilistic Aestheticism: lines 240 to the end reiterate the view from the 'Essay on Shelley' that

[...] 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. (1003)

As previously with reference to the worst poets in *Sordello* and the young addressee in 'Transcendentalism', Browning here condemns poets who denigrate the poetry of the real world and aspire to 'Master the heavens before [they] study earth' ('With Christopher Smart' 242).

The fact that a poem which began in praise of the mixed poetic type closes with a reminder that great poetry must build on the basis of the real world indicates the preference of the objective Browning for his own poetic genius. Unlike so many other poems, 'With Christopher Smart' does not play with the tension between the enounced and the enunciation. Instead, Browning first constructs an ideal and later partially undermines it in the enounced as a token of his insecurity about it. As Drew states, lines 210 to the end surely advocate a middle way between the two poetic extremes (55), but they also display Browning's awareness of how precarious any such balance must be.²⁰

Browning's final reflection *in propria persona* on his poetics, the 'Prologue' to *Asolando*, dated 6 September 1889 and published three months later on the day of his

²⁰ DeVane does not make the distinction between the two extremes which Browning condemns among his contemporaries. He therefore comes up with a mistaken identification of the 'transcendental' poets described in the final section with the nihilist poet of the phenomenal world Swinburne (*Browning's Parleyings* 121-5). The suggestion by King and Cowl that the closing passage attacks 'spokesmen for scientific progress and religious scepticism' is equally baffling (King *et al.* 16: 207-8).

death, reverts to his preoccupation with the redefinition of the subjective / objective dichotomy. After having referred to various other poets as types of the subjective poet throughout his career, he finally and unambiguously pictures himself as the inspired visionary. The method of self-conceptualisation in which Browning splits himself into a subjective, Romantic, younger self and an objective, mature self and monitors his poetic development through the juxtaposition of these two stages resembles that employed in *Sordello* and 'Transcendentalism'. Yet we will discover a crucially new aspect in the distinction between younger and older self.

As in earlier poems, too, Browning's retrospective self-observation is mediated through intertextual allusions to the Romantic tradition. Intertextuality is not restricted to the pastiche of Wordsworth's 'Intimations' Ode in the first two stanzas. The whole poem contains verbal and structural echoes of the type of Romantic reflective poem which tries to find compensation for the mature poet's loss of youthful vision and his spontaneous perception of meaning in nature.²¹ However, if the focus of the 'Prologue' were on the confrontation with other poets, Wordsworth's solution for the predicament stated in the first two stanzas would be mentioned. It is also left open to whom the direct speech in these stanzas is attributed. It is only a springboard for the observation of Browning's own, similar development. The framing of Browning's voice by two other voices – the Wordsworthian voice and God's – emphasises that the meaning of the poem lies in his transition from the one to the other.

The difference from Wordsworth appears as soon as Browning himself speaks. In a discursive tone which contrasts with the dreamily elaborate language of the preceding pastiche, he compares his young and old selves. In contrast to Wordsworth, who never goes so far as to denigrate youth and strives hard to find consolation and 'Strength in what remains behind' ('Intimations' Ode 181), the speaker here devalues the experience of his youth as 'falsehood's fancy-haze' (20). The ageing poet is convinced that the youth's subjective perception which invested nature with meaning was merely an illusion. Even when recounting his first visit to Asolo from the perspective of his younger self, he stressed that things only 'seemed' (24) to be sublime revelations of the deity. Subjective perception and fancy are set in opposition to an

²¹ Bloom (*Poetry and Repression* 195-6) and Phillip Sharp (89) suggest further levels of intertextuality in claiming that the poem is a revision of Shelley's revisions of the Wordsworthian stance. Interestingly, they draw on very different Shelleyan poems.

objective perception of 'the naked world' (32) and empirical fact. The 'Prologue' is thus the first poem in *Asolando* to point to the subtitle of the collection, *Fancies and Facts*. Unlike other poems in the collection, which explore the interrelatedness of fancy and fact, the 'Prologue' is unambiguous in its praise of the objective poetry of fact over the fanciful self-projections of Romantic egotism.

However, the poem rethinks the subjective / objective distinction from the 'Essay on Shelley'. In the 'Essay', the subjective poet

is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth, – an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees [...] (1002)

In the 'Prologue', by contrast, it is the sober perception of the *objective* poet which permits a more direct apprehension of God. The younger self experiences – or thinks he experiences – God because he sees him as immanent in nature, in a manner reminiscent of David or Smart. But his experience is inferior to the unmediated theophany available to the older self. This hierarchy is expressed through the metaphor of visual versus aural perception, the old poet's 'purged ear' versus the young poet's 'eye late dazed' (41-2). This replaces another central opposition from the 'Essay', the subjective seer / the objective fashioner, by a new one, the seer / the listener. The poem rejects the central Romantic conceit of the poet as visionary for two reasons. Firstly, God rebukes the younger self: "At Nature dost thou shrink amazed? / God is it who transcends" (44-5). This implies that the young poet's attitude borders on Pantheistic heresy, since it runs the risk of focussing on nature instead of God's agency behind it. Secondly, no matter how sublime the experience of the younger self was, it did not result in poetry but in silence (30), whereas the older self can 'know and name' nature (37), i.e. he can compose poetry. The youth's experience actually only has value because it is a necessary preliminary to his mature perception.

As Hair observes, Browning's reference to Moses in the poem goes beyond the allusion to the episode of the burning bush, in that he models his development on Moses' in Exodus iii and iv ('Exploring *Asolando*' 6). Moses is first attracted by the sight of the burning bush, which is a visual revelation of God in nature, but is then called by God's voice. Later on God says to Moses: 'I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say' (Exodus iv, 12). Browning thus claims that he, like

Moses, derives his poetry straight from the divine Word. Eleanor Cook points out another parallel with a later stage in Moses' story. She discusses the variations of the phrase 'know and name' here and in several of Browning's poems, such as in 'Popularity' (5) and "'Touch him ne'er so lightly...'" (10), where the phrase refers to representative readers who recognise ideal poets. Cook suggests: 'The phrase probably derives from its only biblical usage, the twice repeated words of God to Moses, when Moses is allowed as far as man may into the divine presence' (*Lyrics* 234). She seems to refer to the phrase 'I know thee by name' in Exodus xxxiii,12 and 17, where Moses speaks to God face to face, i.e. when Moses both sees and hears God.

God's voice teaches the objective poet not only empirical but also a capitalised 'Truth' which lets an object's 'inmost self appear / Through outer seeming' (18-19). Bloom's remark 'This is an absolute logocentrism, and is almost more than any poem can bear, particularly at a time as late as 1889' (*Poetry and Repression* 196) summarises the outrage of these poetics from a postmodern point of view. But in the light of Browning's whole career, they are also highly problematic. The speaker's claim here that he has direct access to a transcendent 'Truth' in his own medium, language, clearly contradicts Browning's long-held views on the nature of language. In the courtship correspondence, he had repeatedly maintained that he was unable to express his ideas in language (e.g. 11 February 1845, *Corr.* 10: 69-70; 24 May 1845, *Corr.* 10: 233-6),²² and to Ruskin he had written: 'I know that I don't make out my conception by my language' (Collingwood 200). In his poetry, he had likewise described language as an obstacle blocking the perceiver from the world and distancing the sender from the addressee. In the line 'I hush and bless myself with silence' (197) in 'One Word More', he had promoted non-verbal communication as an ideal. In the 'Prologue', the young poet's 'Language? Tush! / Silence 'tis awe decrees' (29-30) seems to echo this sentiment.

Browning's application of the New Testament equation of God and Truth with the Word (John i,1) to his poetry is a radical crossover between the systems of art and religion. The promotion of poetry as a way to 'Truth' completely undermines the underlying assumption of functional differentiation and the independence of the work of art from functions in other systems, which we have discovered Browning to support in

²² On his rhetorical strategy of claiming that language cannot express his love, see Karlin *Courtship* Chapter 7.

many mature works. The last poem he publishes thus mirrors the ending of *R&B*, the poem in which he goes furthest in his realisation of the impossibility of absolute observation and truth, but which closes on the Romantic claim that art is a mediator of soul-saving truth. Both the conclusion of *R&B* and the 'Prologue' to *Asolando* reintegrate Browning into the fold of more conservative Victorian writers. But his previous awareness of the subjectivity of perception, which includes the poet, and the difficulty of expression as well as his advocacy of a poetry based on empirical fact make the desperation and problematic contradictions which these poetics imply more visible than in other contemporaries. Lawrence Kramer's analysis of the Victorian revisions of the 'Intimations' Ode pattern identifies these: to avoid Romantic solipsism, the Victorians choose to look outside the self in order to replenish internal losses, but they are then not willing or strong enough to truly replace the Romantic values with different ones, such as objective, empirical fact; instead, they aspire to the same values as the Romantics by positing that their loss of vision is offset by a more than visionary religious experience (335).

The 'Prologue' abounds with tokens of this difficulty. The speaker is unable to explain how his disenchanted perception of the phenomenal world is related to his hearing of the divine voice, which then allows him to write. The progression is a lot more compelling in the case of the younger visionary poet, who so clearly perceives the natural world as a manifestation of God. The enunciation of the flashback to the youth's experience certainly conveys more enthusiasm than the old poet's sober, stagnating double enumeration of 'Hill, vale, tree, flower' (33 and 36). Shaw detects in the diction used to describe the latter's experience, for instance in the 'dragging, alliterating monosyllables' in the line 'But flame? The bush is bare' (35), a 'sense of desolation' and 'a knell-like flatness of tone' ('Browning's "Intimations" Ode' 9). God's address to the younger poet, "'see, all's in ken'" (39), adds to the ambiguity. For Hair, '[i]t suggests that understanding is to be gained through the ordinary sense of sight' because 'see' and 'ken' can both be used in the sense of 'understand' ('Exploring *Asolando*' 6). Indeed, the Old English 'cennan' means to 'to tell' and the German and Dutch 'kennen' means 'to know'. The word's etymology indicates that the younger poet does attain the ideal of knowing and telling or naming, which the older speaker claims as his privilege. Although the poem then closes on God's insistence that the mature state is to be preferred, the use of God's authoritative voice and the

implications in the enunciation thus work – at least to a certain degree – against the promotion of the poetics of the older self which are voiced in the enounced.

The appealing presentation of Browning's visionary phase can partly be explained by the manner of presentation. As the use of the present tense in stanza vi for a situation in the past indicates, the poem here employs the same method as the second half of 'Memorabilia': it shows past experience from the point of view of the younger self. Overall, though, the poem dramatises the opposition between former and present self by presenting itself as Browning's dramatic utterance at the moment when he reflects on the implications of his development, and hence when he comes to register 'the full extent of his loss' (Shaw 'Browning's "Intimations" Ode' 9).

The poem's repeated return to the visionary model, even as late as in the penultimate stanza, demonstrates how difficult it is even for Browning, who has got so far in developing an alternative to Romantic visionary poetics, to substitute established values with new ones. The fact that he feels he has to recruit the authority of God himself to establish the primacy of the older self over the younger shows how desperate he is to convince the reader, and probably himself, that his objective perception is superior to the subjective. As in the 'Epilogue' to the collection (see Chapter III.3), we are left with the impression that Browning protests too much in order to hide his insecurities. His need to enhance the objective poet's access to empirical truth with transcendental insights bears witness to his continuing feelings of inferiority about being a purely objective poet. This new effort at defining a poetic ideal by rejecting the visionary and basing it on his own objective poetry, which claims to be better than visionary, turns out to be as precarious as the alternative model, the vatic poet of the natural world, who combines the subjective and the objective genius in 'Transcendentalism' and 'With Christopher Smart'. Browning thus ends his career without having come up with a single, convincing and practicable ideal which combines the best of two poetic worlds. He proves to be unable to overthrow his own dichotomy from the 'Essay on Shelley'; he remains a dialectician in search of a synthesis.

VII. CONCLUSION: BROWNING AS A TRANSITIONAL FIGURE

I have argued in this thesis that Browning's interest in second order observation is not only manifest in his dramatic monologues, which expose the workings of the speaker's psyche; it also appears in the poems *in propria persona*, in which Browning makes select aspects of his self the object of second order observation. The multiplicity of methods of self-observation in *Sordello* alone bears witness to Browning's acute interest in the process of observation and his awareness of his own unstable or conflicting aesthetic values. The split of his self into speaker and author, who represent different levels of consciousness and sometimes different temporal stages in his evolution, enables him to use these poems as vehicles for a detached observation of his artistic development (e.g. Chapters III.1, V.1 and VI). The poems often function also as a testing ground for the definition of his own poetics in relation to other poetic concepts, above all the self-expressive lyrical tradition (Chapters II and VI), and thereby combine self-observation with the observation and criticism of others. Browning frequently appropriates and distorts the discourse of his opponents. Such poems are a further proof of the talent he displays in the dramatic monologue for adopting the voice of others and indicating the incongruities and problems in their world view.

The differentiation between the statements in the enounced and subversive elements in the enunciation gives Browning the author the possibility at times to distance himself from the views of the speaker 'Browning', who appears as a fictionalised version of his self. As a result, the author manages to hold two conflicting opinions within the same text, without being exclusively committed to one of them. His actual point of view thus often escapes the reader's observation. We have seen how this strategy links Browning to the self-conscious and self-undermining *transcendental buffoonery* of Romantic Irony, a further factor in addition to the change to second order observation that documents his modernity as defined by Luhmann.

When mapping the development of Browning's use of Romantic Irony, Ryals claims that he started out as an ironist, but failed to maintain his ironic double vision in the period between 'Christmas-Eve' and *R&B*. Ryals calls *R&B* 'a transitional poem reintroducing radically ironic notions of art', which heralded the return to the ironic mode in his later work ('Browning's Irony' 42, 46). However, the poems from *Men*

and Women which have been analysed in this thesis show that Browning does use ironic devices in the poems *in propria persona* of his middle period: he displays his awareness of his conflicting artistic ideals and ambitions through calling into question the enounced on the level of the enunciation.

In extending the consciousness of the observer's limitations and subjective point of view from his often clearly biased monologists to himself, Browning comes to doubt a traditional epistemology which assumes the existence of objective truth and perspective. He also undermines the attendant poetics of the omniscient, omnipotent author. In this sense, *R&B* with its implicit statement of the impossibility of comprehensive observation marks the climax of his modernity. Yet at the same time the poem's attitude towards another indicator of modernity, the independence of the art system from other functional systems, shows that Browning remains a transitional figure: in rejecting the mediation of a monolithic truth as its aim and focusing instead on the observation of processes of cognition, the overall structure of the text argues for the autonomy of the work of art, but in the closing lines the poet-speaker tries to reinstate art as an epistemological and moral agent.

Luhmann is surely aware that he is too schematic in assuming a neat shift from a pre-modern, hierarchical society to functional differentiation without any point of return to an interdependence of systems. The obvious cross-over between systems which developed in the nineteenth century and which is relevant for this analysis is that between art and commerce through the commodification of literature. Browning displays an acute consciousness that the Victorian poet has to define himself within this framework. This concern is articulated in the poems which address the issue of his reputation and his position within the literary tradition. The mature poet's regression into Romantic aesthetics, the only widely accepted discourse available to him, and his occasional didacticism, which recreates an authoritative social role for the poet, may be explained at least in part as his efforts to adapt to the general taste and situate himself among eminent contemporary poets.

Browning's alternative to giving in to the predominant aesthetics is to convince readers to abandon their reading habits which focus on the first order observation of the content level in order to adopt his interest in modes of mediation, second order observation and an active search for discrepancies between content and form, enounced and enunciation. In frequently diverting attention from himself to the way the public

observes the poet, Browning incites his readers to a critical observation of their categories for evaluating literature which parallels his observation of his own poetics, thereby stressing his ideal of poet and reader as 'brothers' and equals in the construction of textual meaning. The literary categories which the reader is meant to rethink are above all the tradition of the Romantic expressive lyric (e.g. Chapters II, IV.3 and 4, and VI.2), and to a lesser extent the elegy (Chapters III.1 and V.4.), the narrative romance (Chapters V.1, 2 and 3), the didactic poem, and the prologue and epilogue convention (Chapters IV.5 and 6). In his self-observation, Browning adds to these conventions the definition of the Victorian long poem and the new movements of realism and naturalism (Chapters V.2 and 3). Through their second order observation of how the art system operates and the categories of observation of its participants, Browning's poems *in propria persona* thus contribute to the ongoing self-regulation of the autopoietic art system.

Where do these poems situate Browning within the wider framework of literary history? In their ironic scrutiny of literary conventions and their adoption and adaptation of the categories and discourse of Browning's critics, they could be said to anticipate postmodern metafiction, which uses reflexivity to criticise the mechanisms of the art system. Patricia Waugh sees metafiction as a reaction to the growing

dissociation between, on the one hand, the genuinely felt sense of crisis, alienation and oppression in contemporary society and, on the other, the continuance of traditional literary forms like realism which are no longer adequate vehicles for the mediation of this experience.
(11)

Metafictional texts take up elements of an established literary convention, but parody and undermine them in order to discredit the convention. They thus make the reader aware that a dominant but outworn convention is only one among many manners of representation. Translated into Luhmann's terms, metafiction shows the contingency of alternative perspectives and constitutes a critical second order observation of conventions. As it plays with accepted categories and expectations, metafiction requires an active reader, who can recognise generic elements and their modifications (Waugh 13). Metafiction indicates that, as a consequence of functional differentiation and the specialisation of systems, the demands on the participants in the art system rise: the audience needs to approach the work with a knowledge of styles and conventions (Luhmann 'Kunstwerk' 649).

As is apparent from the quotation above, the theory of metafiction was developed with reference to the genre of the novel and its subversion of the dominant realist tradition, with its notion of reality and its principle of mimesis. Metafiction discredits realism but does not replace the dismantled tradition with a new convention. It is thus a radicalisation of Romantic Irony, which, however, still needs to balance the disruption of literary illusion with a limited endorsement of it. In his engagement with the traditions of realism and Romanticism, which he both uses and subverts, Browning occupies the middle ground of Romantic Irony. He comes closer to the utter scepticism of metafiction in his open attacks on the older tradition of Romantic expressive lyricism (e.g. Chapters IV.3 and 4). But we have seen that, even while posing as an objective poet, he still both consciously and inadvertently draws on Romantic elements in his self-portrayal (e.g. Chapters IV.4, V.2 and VI.2). He thereby exhibits at the same time both a need and an inability to transcend the tradition. Since Browning is one of the pioneers of realism within poetry and writes at the high tide of the convention – unlike twentieth-century metafiction, which is situated at its decadence –, his critique of realism cannot be too radical. Nevertheless, although *R&B* and *RCNCC* rely so heavily on realism, we have noted that the enunciation of these poems already subverts such vital realist notions as authorial omniscience and impartiality. The critical distance which he adopts towards a mode that he himself has introduced bears witness to Browning's outstanding artistic self-consciousness and capacity for second order self-observation.

In conclusion, Browning both applies and simultaneously calls into question two central concepts in his poetics: realism, which is an element of objective poetry, and Romantic self-expression, which is subjective poetry. He is aware that neither of them is perfectly suited to represent his experience of the world, but he cannot successfully discard them and repeatedly tries to fuse them into a compromise (Chapter VI.2). In his nostalgic recourse to constructs that he has come to doubt, Browning anticipates literary modernism. I have sought to show that the poems *in propria persona*, which display both his acute consciousness of the radical change under way in the conditions of artistic creation and reception and his oscillation between embracing modernity and recoiling from it throughout his whole career are a more instructive indicator of his transition to a modern concept of literature of second order observation and an autopoietic art system than the dramatic monologues, which document the completion

of this move. With all their contradictions and tensions, advances and retreats, the poems *in propria persona* allow us to study in detail the *process* of this key transition between different ways of conceptualising the world and the literary mediation of this experience. Given his belief in the value of continuous process, Browning would not have considered his own hesitant, transitional attitude in these poems as detrimental. To EBB he writes:

The cant is, that 'an age of transition' is the melancholy thing to contemplate and delineate – whereas the worst thing of all to look back on are the times of comparative standing still, rounded in their impotent completeness – [...] (17 May 1846, *Corr.* 12: 335)

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