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Loss and Gain An Essay on Browning's Dramatis Personae

Lawrence Poston III

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Lawrence Poston, III

Loss and Gain

An Essay on Browning's
Dramatis Personae

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University of Nebraska Studies

october 1974

Loss and Gain



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An Essay on Browning's *Dramatis Personae*

university of nebraska studies : new series no. 48

published by the university

at lincoln : october 1974

For Andrew Sanford Poston
July 12, 1973—March 28, 1974

Only the prism's obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jewelled bow from blankest white;
So may a glory from defect arise:
Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek,
Only by Dumbness adequately speak
As favoured mouth could never, through the eyes.

--"Deaf and Dumb: A Group by Woolner"

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 74-81367
International Standard Serial Number 0077-6386
Manufactured in the United States of America

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Preface

IN *Dramatis Personae* (1864), Robert Browning's first collection of new poems after *Men and Women* (1855), the poet turned increasingly to situations drawn from contemporary life or involving contemporary issues. The genesis of the volume and its relationship to the intellectual currents of mid-Victorian England have been well explored, but to the best of my knowledge there has been no systematic study of the volume as a unified collection of poems, meant to be read from start to finish. Yet *Dramatis Personae* deserves a treatment which at least attempts to do justice to its integrity as a whole. It is of considerable importance when placed in the context of Browning's career, for it closes the period in which he found himself as an artist and leaves him at the threshold of *The Ring and the Book*. It is the last volume which contains poems dating from Browning's wedded life and thus, in the context of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death, constitutes a kind of stock-taking in which Browning measures his loss against the background of Victorian religious uncertainty and reaffirms his faith as a man and an artist. At the same time, *Dramatis Personae* also shows hints of the disputatiousness of the later poetry; and although seldom in the volume does Browning speak in his own voice, the dramatic tension of the great monologues from the earlier *Men and Women* is, for the most part, missing. *Dramatis Personae* is thus stylistically and philosophically a pivotal volume in Browning's career as an artist, as well as a personal testament of loss.

I have said that the dramatic tension of the monologues of *Men and Women* tends to be absent from *Dramatis Personae*. Because the features of Browning's art that often appeal to the modern reader—his wit, his irony, his sense of paradox—are less in evidence, and because the earlier Browning worshippers tended to read such works as "Prospice," "Abt Vogler," and "Rabbi ben Ezra" as unalloyed statements of Browning's optimism, the 1864 volume has not weathered time nearly as well as its more famous predecessor.

Recent scholars have begun to question the premises of Browning's earlier admirers, especially with respect to whether or not, or how far, we take several of the poems in the volume as personal statements.¹ My own view is that Browning speaks unequivocally in his own voice at most twice in *Dramatis Personae*, once in "Deaf and Dumb: A Group by Woolner," which I have used as an epigraph for this study, and possibly once through the unidentified Third Speaker of the "Epilogue." On the other hand, I think it unwise to treat all the poems in the volume as being dramatic in quite the same way as "Andrea del Sarto" or "My Last Duchess." The speakers of *Dramatis Personae* do tend to say in somewhat greater measure what Browning himself might have said; their views, however, are likely to reflect only a part of the truth, and the perspective of one speaker is not so much disproven as it is enlarged or corrected by that of another. This form of truth-sharing diminishes the possibilities of irony, but it does not require that we take a speaker like Rabbi ben Ezra as merely a transparent disguise for the poet himself. A clue lies in the volume's title, which suggests that the various speakers are persons of a single drama being played out in the consciousness of the poet. This is not to suggest that we are not to dislike Mr. Sludge heartily or to suspect the perspicacity of one or more of the volume's less obviously villainous speakers, but it is perhaps suggestive that even Mr. Sludge, in a sense, confirms the leading themes of *Dramatis Personae* through his very inversion of them.

On balance, the procedure in the volume as a whole strikes me as intermediate between that of *Men and Women* and that of *The Ring and the Book*. On the one hand, we do not have the incredible range and variety of the poems in the two 1855 volumes where Browning, finding his stride as a poet, seems to glory in his diffuseness, his proliferation of dramatically conceived characters. But neither is there any single sequence of events in *Dramatis Personae* against which we can test in common the perceptions of the individual speakers, all of whom, in *The Ring and the Book*, hold fast to at least some shred of the truth and turn their attention to the same drama. In *Dramatis Personae*, we have indeed persons of the drama, but the drama is a drama of ideas rather than of events, of conflicts and contrasts which make up human life generally. Such conflicts and contrasts are adumbrated in the various images and themes, and indeed in the total structure, of the volume, rather than in a single dramatic situation. Even in the "Epilogue,"

the fact that Browning has not David and Renan speaking, but a "First Speaker, as David" and a "Second Speaker, as Renan" (emphasis added), suggests a process by which a mask is assumed for different purposes, rather than two monologues in which a "real life" situation unfolds before our eyes. We are asked, that is, to remember that these are impersonations, not the persons themselves; and the result, while not necessarily undramatic, reminds us continually of the controlling presence of the poet, as if he were investing something of himself in each of the characters. It is not a submission to dramatic illusion that is sought of us as readers, but a critical intelligence which, recognizing the contrivance, moves immediately to the ideas themselves. Language, rhythm, and structure shape those ideas, but our sense of an identifiable personality is less prominent.

The work of previous scholars, cited here with gratitude, has provided much by way of an understanding of the intellectual background of *Dramatis Personae*. My own focus is primarily critical. I have tried to move from a series of readings of poems individually to a consideration of the images and themes that run through the volume and a rationale for its overall arrangement. I defer a full discussion of "Apparent Failure" and the "Epilogue" to the end of the study, for I see them as culminating and in a sense summarizing the main drift of the volume as a whole. *Dramatis Personae* does not have the tangled publication history of the poems which went to make up the two volumes of *Men and Women* in 1855 and the collected edition of 1863. The three new stanzas of "Gold Hair," the sixty new lines of *James Lee's Wife*, and two new poems ("Deaf and Dumb: A Group by Woolner" and "Eurydice to Orpheus: A Picture by Leighton") constitute the most notable additions at the time of the second (1868) edition. But perhaps even more than the arrangement of the shorter poems in the 1863 collection of Browning's works, *Dramatis Personae* shows a structural integrity, and explication is incomplete unless we also make an effort to view the poems as part of a collection which is neither random nor miscellaneous. The experience of working out an order of his poems for the 1863 edition seems to have strengthened Browning's need to arrive at thematic unity, although neither there nor in *Dramatis Personae* is it always possible to justify the placement of each poem with equal confidence or to force the poems into a pattern that might be both rigid and, ultimately, unprovable.²

Sludge's underlying skepticism, however, is reflected in his attitude toward Hiram Horsefall, his patron, and other such gulls:

you've lost this world—you've gained
Its knowledge for the next. What knowledge, sir,
Except that you know nothing?

[ll. 1384–86]

In one way or another, all the poems in *Dramatis Personae* turn on this contrast of loss and gain, and on the attempt to make sense out of loss, thus converting it into gain—whether that attempt is spurious and self-deluded, or a creative manifestation of the questing spirit. Abt Vogler, for one, asks, “And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence / For the fulness of the days?” The answer is more complex than he realizes, but it is possible to piece together an answer of sorts, a set of provisional truths, out of the theme and variations of *Dramatis Personae*.

1. Private Loss

Dramatis Personae was in preparation during much of the three-year period that followed Mrs. Browning's death. Six stanzas which were to be incorporated into *James Lee's Wife* had, however, appeared as a separate poem in the *Monthly Repository* twenty-eight years before; "A Face" had been inscribed in Mrs. Coventry Patmore's album in 1852, and "May and Death" had appeared in the *Keepsake* in 1857. The other poems cannot be dated with equal probability, at least on the basis of prior publication, but DeVane's evidence, however fragmentary (pp. 280-83), suggests a second spurt of energy in 1859 and 1860, several years after the episode with the medium Daniel Home and before Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death. A few of the shorter poems probably followed in 1860 and 1861, and then a third and more prolonged stretch of activity seems to have occurred in the quiet retreats of Brittany in the summers of 1862 and 1863. Here the barrenness of the landscape, the absence of anything other than the most rudimentary and primitive reminders of a past culture, had proved to be as much a stimulus to the poet's creative imagination as an anodyne for his grief. Here he worked on *James Lee's Wife* and probably completed the more ambitious of the new poems on religious themes. I think there is substantial reason to believe that his work had been impeded first by the artistic exhaustion consequent on the completion of *Men and Women*, second by the hostile reviews, and finally by the success of his wife's *Aurora Leigh* and *Poems before Congress*. That in a certain measure he was freed by his wife's death seems at least equally possible. Certainly the opening poem of the new volume not only, as Herford put it, asks "how to live when answering love [is] gone,"¹ but also anticipates Browning's later guilt at having been untrue to his wife's memory.²

James Lee's Wife sets the tone of *Dramatis Personae* in several ways. It introduces a bloc of poems on the subject of human love which together form the first major division of the volume. It is

also more monodrama than monologue; most if not all of the time, there is no apparent audience at all. The first four sections are personal. The wife speaks of the growing alienation between herself and her husband; she wonders why change must affect them, and she suspects that through her own devotion she has unwittingly forged a bond at which he chafes. The second four sections are philosophical in tone, and the immediate domestic situation is left in abeyance while the wife seeks understanding in the natural world and in art. The climactic eighth section, "Beside the Drawing Board," shows Mrs. Lee achieving the wisdom she needs in order to act. In the final section, "On Deck," the wife, having triumphed over self-pity, leaves her husband and embarks alone on a voyage into a world of strife and change. The poem subsides on this note.

Although the general progression of *James Lee's Wife* is clear enough, it is on first reading rather difficult to grasp a principle of order in the actual section-by-section movement of the poem. That Browning saw the poem as an experiment, and a qualifiedly successful one at that, is evident in his often-quoted letter to Julia Wedgwood, in which he describes his characters as

people newly-married, trying to realize a dream of being sufficient to each other, in a foreign land (where you can try such an experiment) and finding it break up,—the man being *tired* first,—and tired precisely of the love: —but I have expressed it all insufficiently, and will break the chain up, one day, and leave so many separate little round rings to roll each its way, if it can.³

Fortunately Browning did not carry through on his scheme. For the stages of the poem's argument do follow from one another, despite the distractions (purposeful though they are) of the shifts in verse form. Furthermore, the unity of the work is enhanced by at least two dominant patterns of imagery. One of these is seasonal; the other occurs in a series of images alternately suggesting space and enclosure. Both patterns are related to the central theme of the poem, the relationship between love and time.

The inwardness of the experience rendered by the poem is emphasized by the peculiar flatness with which Browning treats the external world. The seasonal references both project and comment upon the drying up of a human relationship. In the first section of the poem, the clipped verse form heightens the sense of desiccation. We know that it is autumn, but autumn is not visualized; it is, rather, hardly more than the abstract expression of a mental state:

Ah, Love, but a day
 And the world has changed!
 The sun's away,
 And the bird estranged;
 The wind has dropped,
 And the sky's deranged:
 Summer has stopped.

[ll. 1-7]

With the suppression of the anticipated eighth line which could have rounded off the stanza, Browning emphasizes the abruptness of the transition from summer to fall; in this sense, the concluding line is a logical extension of the phrase "but a day" in the first line, but it also implies an inability to look beyond the present crisis. It thus fulfils the movement of the stanza from the idea of change or mutability, through the idea of *estrangement*, the separation of two people, and finally to a sense of *derangement*, the wife's loss of balance which the dramatic structure of the poem works to restore. World, sun, bird, wind, and sky are at this point only distantly perceived abstractions of reality; the speaker (or thinker) is entrapped in herself.

In the next two sections, the line-length gradually expands, suggesting the growing awareness of the wife, her movement beyond the mere blank wonderment of the opening stanzas. The autumnal landscape is more vividly realized in Section III, "In the Doorway," with its image of the vines writhing in torture on the stakes and the "field red and rough." Although the details of the landscape are now more numerous, they remain abstractions of a kind, as is shown by the speaker's insistent reliance upon numbers: the swallow and her "six young," the fig-tree with its "five fingers," "we two" (man and wife), the "house of four rooms," and the solitary thieves (the rabbit and magpie). These are all devitalized images, and the adherence to bare, factual detail communicated through numbers serves to emphasize both the isolation of the scene and the wife's personal loneliness. The concluding line of Section III, "Whom Summer made friends of, let Winter estrange," expands both in verse form and idea the reference to the opening stanza; now, indeed, we look beyond summer, but only to a bleak winter.

The metaphorical point is driven home in Section IV, "Along the Beach," in which the wife rather coldly describes her husband as "mere ignoble earth," but suggests that even from such resources she could expect, if not a "harvest," at least "a little good grain too." We then understand still more fully the point made at the

end of Section III; in the woman's eyes, summer has yielded to winter without an intervening harvest. The choice of the beach as a location underlines the point, for a beach is level and barren, devoid for the most part of vegetation. The wife's mood of quiet reasonableness contrasts with the hortatory and emotionally overcharged section which precedes Section IV, and rounds off, with a slight subsiding of tension, the first and major division of the poem. But Mrs. Lee must still move from reason to wisdom, and the "new song" which concludes Section IV is in reality hardly more than a termination of the old song, namely that she can now expect infidelity as the reward for her own devotion.

Browning's own new song begins with Section V, "On the Cliff," in which the wife's thoughts are no longer centered on her immediate situation. But her philosophical understanding is as inchoate here as is her grasp of the personal crisis in Section I. This, I think, accounts for the return to a more abrupt, halting verse form reminiscent of the opening section. Each verse stops after three lines, then surges forward in its last three, and the stop-and-go effect suggests the difficulty with which the wife makes the connection between the visible world and the mysterious visitations of human love. Summer has now become a destroyer; the "summer sun" has baked dry the grass on the turf, and only a transient creature like the cricket or butterfly can lend a beauty and grace to the scene, just as only love can give a distinctive coloring to the "level and low" minds of men. At the end of Section IV, the wife sees her husband's love taking wing; in Section V the pattern is reversed, implying that love can return. But the end result of both sections is to stress the randomness of love. The colorlessness of the turf parched by the sun is only emphasized by the blue and red colors which heighten the barrenness of the scene as a whole.

References to the seasons and the landscape thus contribute to the mood, help define the wife's sense of isolation, and ultimately reinforce the theme of time. Another thread of images connects somewhat more subtly the external world and the interior drama of the poem, and those are the images of openness and enclosure. Both function ambiguously. The idea of enclosure is most often suggested by references to hands and embraces, physical or symbolic. These references help to establish, indeed, a pervasive theme in the volume as a whole. The embrace or handclasp seems to become a way of defying mutability. At the very outset the wife, frightened by the prospect of change and impermanence, imagines her husband

bending above her and holding her in his arms (ll. 20–21). At the end of Section VI, still unable to accept the necessary role change must play in the world, she laments:

Only, for man, how bitter not to grave
 On his soul's hands' palms one fair good wise thing
 Just as he grasped it!

[ll. 227–29]

The closed hand implies an attempt to grasp experience or another person, but it may also imply a shrivelling up, an avoidance of contact. Thus the fig-tree in the yard “has furled / Her five fingers” against the impending winter, the vines writhe on their stakes, and “my heart shrivels up and my spirit shrinks curled” (l. 67). The protective enclosure of their house is a mockery (Section II), and her love has become a form of imprisonment for him. It is only in Section VIII, in which the wife, by examining a peasant girl’s rough hand, realizes that her expectations of perfect love on this earth are doomed to frustration, that Browning uses the hand to symbolize both individual freedom and the acceptance of limitations: “The beauty in this,—how free, how fine / To fear, almost,—of the limit-line!” (ll. 256–57).

Imagery of openness in the poem functions with like ambiguity. The enlargement of the wife’s mental perspective defines the narrative movement of *James Lee’s Wife*, but frequently the enlargement, the expansion of a particular view is also vaguely threatening; it is purchased at the expense of security. The planks in love’s ship “start, open hell beneath / Unawares” (ll. 52–53); “the wind with its wants and its infinite wail” (l. 60) is threatening because it comes from a larger world not encompassable by rational analysis, and can be met only by the “infinite range” with which the human spirit may “mate” God’s (ll. 76–77). The titles of the successive divisions—“At the Window,” “By the Fireside,” “In the Doorway,” “Along the Beach”—help to mark off the stages of the wife’s expanding consciousness. The interior drama is a kind of intellectual voyage which culminates in the literal departure of the wife on a ship carrying her away from her husband. The voyage motif suggests a symbolic journey undertaken out of necessity, one which threatens, if it does not indeed end, their relationship, and yet one which is the only route to maturity. Sections II and III present the motif in a compressed form. The title of Section II, “By the Fireside,” may be intended to recall ironically the earlier poem in

Men and Women which portrays so radically different a relationship. Here the wife is preoccupied by thoughts of the destructive processes of time: love's ship may rot in port or disintegrate at sea, but in either case the protection of enclosed space is gone. In Section III the swallow with her young brood looks outward to a troubled seascape which presages disaster, and the sea in turn defies the attempt of man to preserve "one fair good wise thing" in his hand:

For himself, death's wave;
While time first washes—ah, the sting!—
O'er all he'd sink to save.

[ll. 229–31]

Thus enclosure in the poem comes to suggest fixity and security but also suffocation; openness, which is associated most frequently with the voyage motif, suggests change and uncertainty, but finally freedom. Only in Section IX, "On Deck," does the wife make an imaginative synthesis of both ideas. She sets her husband free, but had he unlocked his soul to hers, they might have found a joint freedom in the actual bondage of love:

How strange it were if you had all me,
As I have all you in my heart and brain,
You, whose least word brought gloom or glee,
Who never lifted the hand in vain—
Will hold mine yet, from over the seal

[ll. 348–52]

And at the end, reverting once more to imagery drawn from the seasons ("Why, fade you might to a thing like me . . ."), the wife argues that their love might have defied life's autumn.

James Lee's Wife thus confirms a pattern which had become well established in the earlier poetry: the alternatives of attempting to freeze time or seeking to cooperate with it. And characteristically, Mrs. Lee's philosophical growth comes when she acquiesces in the changes wrought by time. From her fear of it in Section I, through her lament in Section III ("But why must cold spread? but wherefore bring change / To the spirit . . . ?" [ll. 75–77]), she progresses toward a new conception in Section VI, "Reading a Book, under the Cliff," which marks the beginning of her wisdom. Here the narrative movement is underlined by Browning's interpolation of an early lyric of his own, "Still ailing, Wind?" By having Mrs. Lee read the lyric (ll. 152–81) and then comment upon

it herself, he calls attention to his own growth as a poet. The lyric interprets the wail of the wind in a personal manner; the young poet's melancholy is an outgrowth of his fallacious belief that the wind ministers to him alone. As the wind appears to mock someone's sigh, so does Browning mock his own youthful lyric, with its poetic artificialities ("Wilt be appeased or no?" "I know not any tone / So fit as thine to falter forth a sorrow"), the stagey Gothic touch of the nun shivering on her pallet, the sentimentality of the "poor hound" licking his hand. At the same time there is a note of genuine regret in this backward look at a naïve young poet who, like Sordello, resolves to be "undefeated" and to regard all obstacles as merely tests by which he will prove himself. And because the young man's attitude at first seems to be a fair recapitulation of Browning's mature doctrine, it must be noted by way of corrective that the young poet's work lacks the quality of genuine suffering, the "account of pain" that only the years can bring. He must yet learn that the wind's true message is that man is ultimately limited in what he can accomplish:

"Here is the change beginning, here the lines
"Circumscribe beauty, set to bless
"The limit time assigns."

[ll. 209-11]

Beauty cannot be brought changeless "into our heart's core." To Mrs. Lee, at this point in her development, nothing is clear except that "nothing endures." She has not yet embraced change as a good; she is only on the verge of understanding that life is a probation. In the succeeding sections she must capture something of the youth's confidence if she is to persevere, but she must also invest this confidence with the tempering realization that man is not a "god in babe's disguise" (l. 191). As she recognizes in Section VII, "Among the Rocks," human love cannot be "clear gain," but only a stage on man's journey toward heavenly gain. Only at this point is she able to regard the "brown old earth" as a beneficent force. In the peaceful scene among the rocks she sees testimony to that "doctrine, simple, ancient, true" which her suffering has taught her.

If nature is one source of the wife's new-found wisdom, art brings her yet further. The turning point of the poem comes in Section VIII, "Beside the Drawing Board," in which Mrs. Lee develops a more realistic awareness of human limitations by con-

templating a particular work of art. Browning added considerable weight and substance to this section in 1868 with a new passage (ll. 270–330) which makes explicit the “worth of flesh and blood.” The addition of these lines does not, however, represent any change of philosophical attitude. It merely confirms in more detail the position which the poet had already articulated in *Sordello*, *Pippa Passes*, and the poems which explore the dangers of the idealizing tendency in art. The beauty of the “rough peasant hand” exceeds Da Vinci’s handiwork because it is God’s creation, not man’s. The painter, like Browning’s earlier grammarian, can only endeavor to solve the mystery through years of painstaking study of detail: “Now the parts and then the whole!” (l. 322). But this pursuit, the attempt to understand the “poor and coarse” realities of human existence, is of itself sufficient to dignify a human life. Da Vinci’s imagined advice is a warning against undue self-pity. But the speaker here is not an aspiring *Sordello* or Jules, or even the devoted husband of “One Word More” and “By the Fireside,” but rather a disillusioned woman learning humility and stoic endurance. Had the wife only felt James Lee return her love, she might have been oblivious to the fading of her own beauty; and her recognition of this fact (IX, viii) forestalls any final comfort. The new insight which she attains only serves to preface the bleaker, more attenuated vision of human love which dominates *Dramatis Personae*. In this volume, or so the opening poem already seems to indicate, the poet’s hope lies elsewhere than in personal relationships.

Only the deservedly unpopular “Gold Hair,” with its commonplace moralizing on the mixture of good and evil in the human heart, intervenes between *James Lee’s Wife* and the three disillusioned shorter poems which follow it and which develop, from different and increasingly despairing perspectives, the volume’s initial theme of estrangement. In the first of the three, “The Worst of It,” the woman who broke her promise is by implication compared to the woman of “Gold Hair”; both, outwardly saints, were in reality false. The fairy-tale lust for gold, however, dwindles in seriousness beside the second woman’s “minute of trivial wrong.” And yet the speaker of “The Worst of It” has not escaped with his own integrity unscathed; he has lost not only his belief in his power to affect events, but his trust in beauty and truth themselves. Left alone, he can only mock his own rhetoric: “my heart feels ice while my words breathe flame” (l. 108). In his stagnant misery the

speaker, in short, has "the worst of it," and as is so often the case with Browning's characters we hesitate between sharing his indignation and questioning his very premises.

"Dîs Aliter Visum; or, Le Byron de Nos Jours," once again invites comparison with the earlier poem in *Men and Women*, "By the Fireside," both for its suggestive use of setting and its striking reversal of the situation in the earlier work. In "Dîs Aliter Visum" the woman accuses her distinguished author-friend of having failed to seize the moment ten years before in which their love might have been declared. Such an action could indeed have broken through the restraints of time. Instead, she believes, the man has assumed that "an hour's perfection can't recur" (l. 70) and that such an impulsive deed, viewed in the cold light of reason after the event, would inevitably seem mistaken. In his failure he is not, after all, so very far above the starfish, a lower order of life which, "whole in body and soul," can never aspire beyond its limited perfection. The image of the starfish is appropriate to the landscape of the scene ten years before, a landscape which, unlike that of "By the Fireside," remains distant from the two undeclared lovers instead of cooperating to bring about a change in them. The woman suggests that perhaps the man has compared her intellect to that of dabblers at the sea's edge not far from the bathhouse. By implication he, on the other hand, has seen himself as the "true sea-lover," the man of ideas. Ironically, however, he has failed to emulate the freedom of the fishing gull by accepting the obligations of a more intimate relationship with her. The church, like that of "By the Fireside," might have offered them a warning too, she argues, if only he had been wise enough to perceive it. But instead of seeing in the votive frigate a sign of the rewards of venturing forth on the sea, he had merely found confirmation in the church's distance from "human fellowship" for his rejection of the relationship which was within his grasp. Hence the setting, instead of acting as a source of union for the two, had been merely the subject of idle comment, assuming no more meaning than the fashionable salon in which the two are now conversing, "by a window-seat for that cliff-brow, / On carpet-stripes for those sand-paths" (ll. 109-10). The result of the man's failure has been that four souls are lost instead of two, for the author and the younger woman have both separately made fashionable marriages in which neither party is happy.

Perhaps, as has been frequently pointed out, the subtitle of

this melancholy poem reflects the un-Byronic caution of the nineteenth-century author who, aged and distinguished, is confident of admission to the wholly respectable *Académie Française*. The poem is certainly conceived in the disillusioned vein in which Browning excels and which runs through the entire volume, but its effect—finally terrible in its satiric vision of four lost, if fashionable, souls—is Byronic even though the elderly author in the poem is not. On one level the subtitle is ironically appropriate, for Byron's *Don Juan* is, after all, an essentially passive hero. The difference resides in the “ache of modernism,” the gray disenchantment and the knotty, somewhat self-conscious intellectualizing which informs the whole situation and which is heightened by the complexity of the narrative technique: for example, the woman imagines the author's imagining her own thoughts after a wedding that never took place. Such an elaborate manipulation of point of view seems to reflect Browning's growing concern with the relativity of human perception; and we come to realize, through the complicated interaction of hypothesis and fact, that the woman has shared in the man's failure.

The final piece in this first sequence of poems on domestic subjects is “Too Late,” which, coming after “*Dis Aliter Visum*,” rounds off the theme of thwarted love initiated in *James Lee's Wife*. The crux of the man's musings is in his regretful words:

I ought to have done more: once my speech,
And once your answer, and there, the end,
And Edith was henceforth out of reach!

[ll. 49-51]

Given to self-dramatization, the speaker seems at times to find his primary consolation in his own inflated rhetoric (e.g. Stanza III) and in the thought that he has been silently, if uselessly, constant to the woman whose love he failed to pursue with the requisite energy during her lifetime. The words of the last stanza suggest that he is idealizing not so much Edith as his emotional attachment to her:

'Tis your slave shall pay, while his soul endures,
Full due, love's whole debt, *summum jus*.
My queen shall have high observance, planned
Courtship made perfect, no least line
Crossed without warrant.

[ll. 137-41]

Although this poem concludes the first sequence of poems on the subject of private loss, Browning returns to that subject in a second group clustered between "Caliban upon Setebos" and "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" and here he emphasizes still more the way in which human relationships may be thwarted by either separation or death. In "Confessions," a dying man seeks consolation in the memory of his early love and then wrests a kind of comfort from the very fact of impending death; in "May and Death" a woman, surveying her loss, experiences a sadness in the fact of her survival. "Youth and Art" reenacts the situation of "Dis Aliter Visum," but with no attempt to recall a single decisive moment in the two lives which are being reviewed by the woman who speaks. It underlines somewhat more, however, the essential mediocrity of the result, and the failure not only to seize the moment but to endure that mixture of pain and pleasure which is a prerequisite to spiritual growth: "We have not sighed deep, laughed free, / Starved, feasted, despaired,—been happy."

It is perhaps suggestive that in 1864 Browning placed "Prospice" between "May and Death" and "Youth and Art," as if to provide a counterweight to those poems reflecting grief or frustration. For "Prospice" reflects a kind of delight in the process of dying as a means to the attainment of eternal rest and reunion with a loved one. In language reminiscent of "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,'" the speaker of "Prospice" asserts:

No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold.

[ll. 17-20]

Yet read in the context of the volume as a whole, the poem reflects only one attitude toward death, and not necessarily the dominant one. In 1868 Browning placed two new poems before and after "Prospice," "Deaf and Dumb" and "Eurydice to Orpheus." Superficially, perhaps, these poems help to provide further elaboration for those which dwell on the relationship between life and art ("Youth and Art," "A Face," "A Likeness"), but they also reinvolve issues buried in the deepest recesses of the private life. "Eurydice to Orpheus" evokes a fear, rather than a welcoming, of the process of separation; and while the speaker of "Prospice," with a stridency which is perhaps deliberate on Browning's part, welcomes the future

and the death that it brings, Eurydice desires to obliterate future and past alike and to prolong the present moment. In "Deaf and Dumb," the theme of private loss is expressed most succinctly; and here, even the shadow of a dramatic device which seems present in "Prospice" is missing. This brief but moving commemoration of the statuary of children who can neither speak nor hear brings together several themes: the relationship of loved ones to each other (and the estrangement that so often results), the relationship of Browning's poetic procedure to his audience, and by implication the relationship of life to death. Death, as anticipated in our struggles with "pain, darkness and cold," lends life and love meaning; it stands between us and the other world, breaking the sunbeam into the "jewelled bow" of this life. So do the multiple voices of *Dramatis Personae*, setting forth one by one their respectively limited but ultimately interdependent views of reality, intervene prismatically between us and unshaded truth. The would-be lovers in *Dramatis Personae* who fail to speak, to seize the moment and thus to commit themselves to each other fully and generously, illustrate by their very passivity and inertia a divine scheme capable of working its ways through other, more fitting channels.

2. The Religious Vision: Aspiration

THOSE POEMS in *Dramatis Personae* which examine various aspects of the private life all share the dual theme of loss and failure. Of the speakers in the opening poems, only Mrs. Lee clearly learns from experience; the others lose not only another person but the opportunity for growth. And even the final triumph of Mrs. Lee is an attenuated one; her wisdom leads to loneliness, and her voyage at the end is less a commitment to a "larger hope" than a bleak acceptance of maturity and of the necessary scaling down of her own hopes. Browning seems to suggest that human capacities fail when unsupported either by true self-knowledge or by a framework of belief in some larger meaning in the universe. It seems appropriate that the five initial poems on personal relationships are followed by four which treat philosophical and religious themes. Thus in reading the poems in the volume consecutively, we move from the dramatization of individual experience to the placing of that experience in a larger context; the focus is now on the speaker in relation to the universe rather than to his or her own kind.

"Abt Vogler" and "Rabbi ben Ezra" both lead up to "A Death in the Desert," and both, although they state much of what Browning himself appears to have believed, remain purposively incomplete as philosophical statements. As the completed "Saul" was the philosophic centerpiece of *Men and Women*, so is "A Death in the Desert" in the total scheme of *Dramatis Personae*, although dramatically the culminating poem of the volume as a whole is "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" as I shall attempt to show later. Both "Saul" and "A Death in the Desert" in many respects state the poet's personal views, and yet in both, intricacies in narrative and dramatic treatment complicate the tone and suggest potential ironies as well as liberating insights. And both are followed in their respective volumes by poems in which the revelation is progressively diminished. The portrayal of divine love and of a nearly perfect human love in "Saul" and "By the Fireside" is

succeeded by the disillusioned perspectives of "Any Wife to Any Husband" and "Two in the Campagna," while in *Dramatis Personae* St. John is followed by Caliban, and in "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" religious and poetic ideals have degenerated altogether into a species of trickery. Read consecutively, the poems provide a dramatic movement, and it is chiefly "Apparent Failure" and the "Epilogue" which intervene to arrest a mood of increasing skepticism and despair and to affirm what Mrs. Lee seeks in the ambiguous conclusion of her narrative. Thus the optimism of "Abt Vogler" and "Rabbi ben Ezra" is tempered throughout most of the volume by an awareness of the limits of human love and by a sense of the inevitability of human suffering.

"Abt Vogler" opens with the musician comparing the "structure brave" of his improvisation to Solomon's palace. The contrast between the apparent permanence of the palace and the temporary quality of Vogler's piece is given an unexpected twist by the fact that the first has faded into legend, while the second—the work of a few moments in the life of an obscure musician—assumes a far greater significance as a dramatization of divine process. When Abt Vogler sees his improvisation as having "rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass," we understand that the comparison has been reversed in his failure. Gold is something permanent and valuable, glass fragile, but glass also has that quality of pure transparency which is the prototype for the perfect vision of God. But glass is also self-effacing, invisible to the degree that it is perfectly clear. Hence, while Solomon's palace has yielded to the present reality of Abt Vogler's musical edifice, that in turn anticipates the unseen "houses not made with hands" which, in Abt Vogler's view, are superior to any palace of art (Stanza IX). The progressive obliteration of distance (IV) and time (V) leads to the affirmation that in the moment of creation the composer "was made perfect too." But it is here that the reader pauses uneasily. Abt Vogler has focused so intensely on a perfect world beyond time that he fails to perceive fully the role played by human frailty, and we begin to wonder if the quest for permanence has not become a kind of self-delusion. Abt Vogler's argument that "[I] must be saved because I cling with my mind / To the same, same self, same love, same God" recalls the supreme and prideful self-confidence of Johannes Agricola in Browning's earlier poem. Likewise, the flat assertion that "evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound" seems facile in the context of the other poems in

Dramatis Personae, and the casual equation of sorrow, failure, and doubt with musical discord is a pat metaphor inadvertently jarred by the declaration that "God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear; / The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know." I think there is a shade of uncertainty in Browning's view of his speaker, an uncertainty reflected not only in the somewhat strained rhetoric but in the tonally uncertain ending. Just how do we take Abt Vogler's note of sober acquiescence in the "C major of this life" and his sleep at the end? Is he reasserting the primacy of the here and now through which Browning's speakers in *Dramatis Personae* must always pass in order to achieve awareness? Or is he an oversimplifier, unaware of the sharps and flats which make life a complex struggle? Browning does not seem to resolve the question.

Like "Abt Vogler," "Rabbi ben Ezra" poses difficulties of tone and logic. It is easy to hear Browning's voice in the speaker's assertion that mere hedonism, a mindless *carpe diem*, is a species of foolishness, or in the speaker's warning against attempting to prolong the present moment rather than submitting one's soul to the shaping power of time. And Rabbi ben Ezra's insistence that "all that is, at all, / Lasts ever, past recall" (ll. 157-58) reasserts that hope which threads its way through the volume and is captured in Abt Vogler's reminder that

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

[Stanza X]

But the passivity and helplessness suggested by the comparison of the clay to the soul seems at odds with the idea of self-improvement through struggle which the rabbi expresses also, while the metaphor of the cup which is amended, given perfection, and finally completed through death, has both static and passive connotations which seem similarly incongruous. Yet like "Abt Vogler," the poem lacks the necessary clues from which we may calculate an ironic perspective. We are left with the feeling that to some extent the metaphor of the potter's wheel has ended by dictating the ideas rather than illustrating them.

"Rabbi ben Ezra" begins by sketching a perfectly familiar Browningsque theme: that what separates human beings from the

comfortable beasts is the ability to doubt and to aspire, indeed to embrace pain and rebuff. After weighing the claims of soul and body, the speaker leads us to the climax of the first section: "Nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!" (l. 72). The final seven stanzas do not, however, maintain this equilibrium. The reason, I suspect, may be sought in the middle stanzas of the poem (XIII-XXV), where philosophical optimism comes to seem very much like a form of self-compensation. At the beginning of this middle section, Rabbi ben Ezra continues to develop the idea of life as growth and progress. Man is characterized as "a god though in the germ." The "adventure brave and new" of old age has brought Rabbi ben Ezra, like the speaker of *Childe Roland*, to a twilight setting, but in Stanza XIX the shift is to a mood of acquiescence unlike the mood of either "'Childe Roland'" or "Prospice." Rabbi ben Ezra suggests that in his old age, the thinker can abandon the struggle and free himself for the contemplation of the approaching revelation. Yet later in the volume, Mr. Sludge savagely undercuts such an argument:

Young,—you've a hope, an aim, a love: it's tossed
 And crossed and lost: you struggle on, some spark
 Shut in your heart against the puffs around,
 Through cold and pain; these in due time subside,
 Now then for age's triumph, the hoarded light
 You mean to loose on the altered face of things,—
 Up with it on the tripod! It's extinct.

[ll. 1371-77]

Of course Sludge's skepticism, like the rabbi's optimism, is only incompletely true, but Sludge here seems to have a sense of struggle which the rabbi lacks. Furthermore, almost as jarring as Abt Vogler's assertion of the superiority of musicians is Rabbi ben Ezra's facile division of the world into "great minds" and "small" (l. 122). Again, we seem to see pridefulness along with self-confidence.

I would suggest, then, that both Abt Vogler and Rabbi ben Ezra must have their vision of reality supplemented by St. John's larger and wiser, though still not all-encompassing, view. Neither Abt Vogler nor the rabbi grasp fully the doctrine of development through struggle. Abt Vogler accepts the limitations of the present life and longs for eternity, but confesses his frustrations in perpetuating, through his music, a conjunction of the two; and in his confidence that "music sent up to God by the lover and the bard" will be heard "by and by," he derives gain from loss somewhat too

facilely. Rabbi ben Ezra's glance at the frustrations of human life is perhaps not unlike Browning's view of his own career:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

[ll. 145-50]¹

But the rabbi seeks consolation in old age as a resting place, much like Abt Vogler's "C major": "I shall know, being old," he declares in Stanza XV, and in Stanza XXI he adds, "Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!" For the rabbi, the last day of human life is a kind of judgment day and death a completion, a perfection of the cup rather than the initiation of a new dimension of existence. For both speakers, the confident assertion of permanence seems to predominate over the acceptance of the provisional, the incomplete; what is missing is St. John's fuller understanding of "progress, man's distinctive mark alone, / Not God's, and not the beasts' . . ." (ll. 586-87). Yet the views of both Abt Vogler and Rabbi ben Ezra are necessary strands in the larger and more complex patterns of the volume as a whole.

"A Death in the Desert" comes perilously close to justifying itself in the language of prose. Its argumentative quality makes it a fit companion-piece for "Rabbi ben Ezra," with which it shares certain philosophical assumptions, but it goes beyond "Rabbi ben Ezra" in its attempt to define a Christian alternative to Darwinian evolution.² The process by which the dying John is revived, described in a very few lines, suggests dimly an analogy with David's awakening of Saul, but John is an ancient sage with certain human weaknesses mustering his strength to speak one last time. A closer analogy in both theme and strategy is to be found in the earlier "Cleon" and "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," in that all three poems are written documents which purport to assay the truth of the Gospel story. But in "A Death in the Desert" Browning's imaginary manuscript presents a speaker who, though he had once attained revelation and is now trying to correct misreports, is adding new errors of his own in the process. There is irony, to be sure, but it lies in what intrudes not only between Christ and St. John—the passing of years—but between St. John and ourselves.

While his arguments converge at certain points with Browning's, we are not listening to John, much less Christ, directly. We have instead a *reported* monologue, or more accurately a deathbed sermon; the manuscript, with additions by commentators, has been inherited by Cerinthus from Xanthus, his wife's uncle; it is reputedly the work of Pamphylax before his martyrdom, and it attempts to record St. John's words about his career. The narrator who adds at the end that "'twas Cerinthus that is lost" provides yet a fifth screen between ourselves and the original Christian story. Browning's insistence on the tenuous chain that links his reader to the original Gospel thus works two ways. On the one hand, it tends to confirm any received belief we may hold that the essential truth of the Christian story has not been lost, despite the overlays of time. On the other, it shakes our belief that we can affirm with absolute certainty everything Pamphylax remembers St. John saying in the latter's *own* attempt to recapture *his* original certainty. Dramatic irony thus derives from the narrative frame rather than from an internal division or debate in the mind of the speaker.

In its barest form, the theme of "A Death in the Desert" is stated in a section which is not actually part of Pamphylax's manuscript but is rather the manuscript reader's summary of the "glossa of Theotypas" (ll. 82-104), hence a codification of earlier belief. The section sets forth with rigid compactness the doctrine of the "triple soul": first, a soul of the physical parts, which "Does"; second and higher, a soul

which, seated in the brain,
 Useth the first with its collected use,
 And feeleth, thinketh, willeth,—is what Knows[;]

and finally, the third and highest soul, a union of the lower souls and a link between man and God, "what Is." Briefly, then, the three interdependent souls are identified with doing, knowing, and being. So far the glossa. But although concepts introduced here are central to the poem, the glossa itself is a mere skeleton of a doctrine which barely hints at the vitality of the Christian experience. Hence it comes early, and almost parenthetically, in the poem; at best it represents the realm of intellection, while the experience and testimony of John himself is necessary to link the doctrine to life.

The idea of the triple soul, however, permeates the very struc-

ture of the poem, a tripartite division which brings into focus the major movements of narrative and argument. The first part of the poem, lines 1-197, presents the scene and describes John's career. He has tried to show forth Christ's love in his own speaking and writing; he has also taught by "reasoning from [his] knowledge" that men should believe in love. He has lived to witness the growth of skepticism and uncertainty, even as his own doctrines have evolved in meaning for him: "What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars, / And named in the Gospel I have writ" (ll. 174-75). Although he believes he has managed to preserve the faith of younger men in his later day, he has now fallen ill and awakens shortly before dying to anticipate the skepticism of the Victorian era. The biblical critics of Browning's own day had begun to question the authenticity of the Gospel according to St. John, arguing from internal evidence that it was considerably later than the other three. Browning attempts to counter them here by postulating an evolution of the doctrine in St. John's own mind; the old man understands better now what he experienced in his youth. One might say in short that the purpose of this first section is to show John working, *doing* the will of God. And yet in the process, as Elinor Shaffer points out, he ironically confirms the Tübingen school's view that the Fourth Gospel is a "Hellenistic theology" at a remove from original apostolic experience, and embodies dramatically Renan's suggestion that he has outlived his original vision of Christ (p. 214). His confession that he was not at the cross, his claim to have performed a miracle himself, shows his adopting a kind of strategy to justify himself, with the ambiguities of his strategy being further complicated by questions as to how accurately the manuscript reports it. It is no accident that Browning insists on quotation marks whenever St. John speaks; we are constantly being reminded that he is being quoted.

The second major section of the poem, I would suggest, is lines 198-366, where John shifts into reasoned argument, examining the question of how we *know*. He employs the metaphor of the optic glass to suggest his own technique for persuasion; reason will now give assistance to the "unassisted eye":

. . . Ye need,—as I should use an optic glass
"I wondered at erewhile, somewhere i' the world,
"It had been given a crafty smith to make;
"A tube, he turned on objects brought too close,
"Lying confusedly insubordinate

"For the unassisted eye to master once:
 "Look through his tube, at distance now they lay,
 "Become succinct, distinct, so small, so clear!
 "Just thus, ye needs must apprehend what truth
 "I see, reduced to plain historic fact,
 "Diminished into clearness"

[ll. 227-37]

John begins by describing the close relationship of the soul and body. Like Rabbi ben Ezra, he argues that sin, pain, and death are necessary ingredients of human experience, and that old age has its own sort of glory. Nevertheless, while the body can indeed instruct the soul and attain a kind of physical perfection in this life, its lesson is abbreviated by its mortality. The soul, unlike the body, is capable of evolution indefinitely; and so while physical progress, once attained, is sure, spiritual evolution must be constantly retested by doubt. The career of St. John himself illustrates this. Threatened by a Roman mob, he found his courage wanting and forsook Christ, but this very human weakness helped to shape his soul and became a steppingstone to further spiritual progress. The physical test was succeeded, however, by another and more difficult one, this time posed by those literalists who insisted on an immediate proof of Christ's coming. The latest threat is from those who ask not even how we know Christ, but whether John himself existed.

The third major section of the poem (ll. 367-665) then extends the range of John's argument to encompass the difficult relationship between knowing and being. If, with those of Browning's contemporaries like Feuerbach, we argue that Christ is a projection of man's best impulses or human love, and that the Christian myth, as a successor to the Greek myths, is subject to the same demythologizing, then in effect we have made divine Being contingent on man's knowledge, and subordinated the third soul to the second. It is St. John's purpose to counter this more sophisticated argument. God, he declares, remains unchanging, and man apprehends Him anew at each stage of history; hence miracles are no longer necessary to prove his existence. St. John grants the relativity of all human perception, but points to this as evidence that

"our minds . . . see
 "Of the shows o' the world so much and no more
 "Than God wills for His purpose"

[ll. 467-79]

It is our knowing which is contingent on divine Being, and so St. John affirms:

"I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
"Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
"All questions in the earth and out of it,
"And has so far advanced thee to be wise."

[ll. 474-77]

This amounts to Christianizing the evolutionary hypothesis.

Following these words, which would seem to represent a climactic perception in the poem, the speaker turns to the more mundane task of translating them into practical ethics. One should not spend one's time reexamining a settled question, he asserts, but rather put that proof to use "in life's mere minute." Not to do so is to turn on oneself, to renounce the use of the will and wait idly for

"what modicum of help
"Had stopped the after-doubt, impossible
"I' the face of truth"

[ll. 522-24]

To affirm the all-sufficiency of human love is, ultimately, to become unloving. The second soul must not be divorced either from its subordinate or its superior. For *knowing* is the seat of the intermediate will which transforms love into might; the only true law is the law of love. It is not the skeptic's idea of law, i.e., a blindly governing force in Nature.³

St. John's philosophical argument is implicitly an equation of the three ascending souls with beast, man, and God respectively. Man occupies an intermediate state; the beast cannot progress beyond a lower form of animal perfection, and for God, the perfect Being, progress is an irrelevancy. Man alone is capable of spiritual growth; he "creeps ever on from fancies to the fact" and converts air "into a solid he may grasp and use" (ll. 583-85). The topography of "A Death in the Desert" parallels the idea of three souls which has informed the poem's structure. For St. John is brought from the secret, innermost cave to the "midmost grotto" where his dying thoughts are imparted to the listener. ". . . Noon's light," says the writer, "reached there a little" (ll. 26-27), and this partial lighting of the scene underlines the half-expectant, half-comprehending eagerness of John's listeners who require the allaying of their own doubts. The outer cave provides the link with

the outside world, where the Bactrian convert keeps watch while he grazes his goat. The secret chamber, furthest from the world, is the location of the "seventh plate of graven lead" on which is inscribed the promise of the Resurrection. The reference also suggests the seventh seal of Revelation and implies that the innermost cave conceals the ultimate secret of human existence and death.

In fact, however, the poem develops in such a way that the apparent symbolism of the caves—the physical world of grazing goats and persecuting soldiery, the world of human knowledge and spiritual evolution, the innermost world of divine truth—is reversed. This is done through the use of motifs of light, fire, and darkness, all in close association with the idea of vision. The dying "ashes" of John, the last human link with Christ, are briefly revived by his speech (ll. 105–12), but are only a suggestion of the flaming presence of Christ himself. The inner light of the speaker has grown over the years, converting "points" to "stars," and that light must take the place on this earth once occupied by Christ's presence. As John approaches death, "'scarce a shred'" intervenes between himself and "'the universal prick of light'" (ll. 204–5); significantly, he dies at noon. St. John himself argues that in the words *I see* can be recognized the spirit of both Power and a Love "'that moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds / His eye and bids him look'" (ll. 222–25). The whole process of the poem is devoted to unblinding not only the incipient doubters who surround John's place of death, but those Victorian unbelievers who apply reason to the demolition of historical revelation. The light of truth in later years has been "deadened of its absolute blaze" (l. 320). St. John's problem now is like that of persuading a child born in a cave that there is more light than he sees. Furthermore, the light of reason, God's great gift to man, may be misused to lead him into ignorance, like "'a lamp's death when, replete with oil, it chokes'" (l. 486). Nonetheless, this is the risk we must take as human beings, for we cannot remain in the hieratic innermost cave. If John's hearers are to translate their insight into action, the caves must be forsaken for the light of the world, the "noon and burning blue" in which Christians accept their martyrdom. And it is then that we remember the burden has already been accepted, not by the reasoners in the cave or the subsequent commentators on the manuscript, but by the Bactrian convert standing watch, who "was but a wild childish man, / And could

not write nor speak, but only loved" (ll. 649-50). He is one of Browning's innocents, like Pompilia, to whom is granted a simple and direct vision of the Good.

In its linking of aesthetic and religious theme, "A Death in the Desert" belongs with "Saul," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "Abt Vogler," and "Rabbi ben Ezra," but here the aesthetic theme, the setting, and the structure are all shaped by the nature of the argument. The imaginary doubter equates Prometheus's theft of fire, alluded to twice in the poem (ll. 279-86, 531-39) with John's "fable"; the doubter asks, "Is John's procedure just the heathen bard's?" (l. 530). The answer is that the Christian poet is no mere spinner of parables; John's whole attempt is to do just what is demanded of him, i.e., "tell the whole truth in the proper words." Language itself, as Browning has so often stressed before, is only an expedient, a kind of creeping on "from fancies to the fact" (l. 583). The expedient, however, marks man as something more than beast, if less than God. Artist and religious searcher are identical:

"God's gift was that man should conceive of truth
"And yearn to gain it, catching at mistake,
"As midway help till he reach fact indeed.
"The statuary ere he mould a shape
"Boasts a like gift, the shape's idea, and next
"The aspiration to produce the same"

[ll. 605-10]

The artist, John goes on, works progressively closer toward "truth itself," and hence as a creator he emulates, if he does not equal, the ability of God to fashion flesh (ll. 606-24).

St. John does not speak for Browning; yet this fact does not automatically make his speech a dramatic monologue. To the extent that John's words, handed down in manuscript, embody a kind of truth, it is the truth inherent in a collective experience, in Elinor Shaffer's words "a process by which the claim to ocular witness [is] transformed into the claim to valid Christian experience," with "deprivation" being converted into "gain" (p. 217). As she goes on to observe, "Personal experience is absorbed and universalized in doctrine, but is not lost there" (p. 219). What she has argued helps, I think, to show how "A Death in the Desert" prepares us for an "Epilogue" with its vision of a Christ repeatedly yet differently actualized in succeeding generations; John is more a vessel for the transmission of truth than he is its perfect defender.

Caliban's speech, which follows, works an arresting reversal; we are asked to look there at a personality which is not sufficiently developed to infer a divine benignity behind apparently random and malignant acts, and yet a personality which in its insistence on empiricism is strikingly modern. Caliban is a pre-Johannine savage living in a post-Johannine world.

3. The Religious Vision: Debasement

IN "CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS," Browning seems to return to *Sordello's* early experiment:

He left imagining, to try the stuff
That held the imaged thing, and, let it writhe
Never so fiercely, scarce allowed a tithe
To reach the light—his Language.

[ll. 570-73]

Caliban's language recalls the remark of John that "man knows partly but conceives beside, / Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact" To communicate this quality of mind, Browning here reverts to the compact, overcrowded line characteristic of *Sordello*; the differences between the Morgan Library manuscript and the published version suggest, as is frequently the case with Browning's revisions, an attempt deliberately to roughen the texture of the verse, whether by inverting the word order or suppressing rudimentary grammatical particles.¹ Caliban's harsh, disjointed speech comes as a relief after the almost too-placid, discursive quality of "A Death in the Desert."

Much of the imagery of the poem is appropriate to a work which derives its epigraph from Psalm 50. The verse following the one quoted in the epigraph reads, "Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver . . ." The hesitation of the critics ever since the poem's publication to decide whether "Caliban upon Setebos" satirizes a Calvinist deity or the evolutionists can perhaps be resolved by an appeal to the violence of the imagery, a violence which blends suggestions of the Old Testament and Tennyson's famed "Nature red in tooth and claw."² The "fruit to snap at, catch and crunch" (l. 11), the auk "that floats and feeds" (ll. 47-48), the badger doing its hunting by moonlight (ll. 48-50), the magpie "that pricks deep into oak-worts for a worm" (ll. 50-51), the imaginary clay bird that nips off

grasshopper horns (l. 82)—such images accumulate until Caliban, emulating Setebos, imagines himself “making and marring clay at will (l. 97), stoning crabs and twisting their pincers off, or twitching the feathers from a jay. The diction is an attempt to portray a world without subtleties, dominated by basic senses of touch, taste, and sight. When Caliban attempts metaphor, he falls back on similes comparing himself with Setebos (“so He”), or on physical description, as when he tries to imagine the cruel god Setebos growing into the higher God, the “Quiet,” “as grubs grow butterflies” (ll. 247–48).

Caliban’s apprehension of the Quiet would seem to illustrate John’s idea that man understands God anew at each stage of history and no longer requires miracles. And Caliban’s efforts to differentiate himself, Setebos, and the Quiet are a kind of grotesque parody of the triple soul: Caliban the doer, Setebos the knower, and the Quiet, which simply *is*. But Caliban himself is incapable of imagining a world without frequent supernatural intervention, always in a physical form. The ending of the poem suggests Psalm 50.iii.: “Our God shall come and shall not keep silence; a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him.” Nonetheless Caliban’s half-articulated beliefs ironically reverse what we might expect. His dual conception of divinity works a variation on the Christian idea, for Setebos, the god who comes to earth, resembles the Old Testament’s vengeful deity, while the Quiet—aloof, superior, distant—is a separate entity, a remote power. Caliban postulates both but sees no connection between them, and here he both differs from those Victorians who envisioned Christ as God’s son and resembles those who argued that Christ was only a man like themselves. Caliban is also unlike the Victorian evolutionists in that while he glimpses a hierarchical order by analogies, he has only a dim sense of process. Thus he compares his control over the crabs to Prospero’s control over him and the control which presumably Setebos exercises over both; he also perceives that the Quiet might rule Setebos if It cared. Only toward the end does he glimpse the possibility that Setebos might “grow into” the Quiet; and this is replaced, at the end of his musings, by the less abstruse notion that either the Quiet will conquer Setebos or the latter will doze off, “as good as die” (l. 283). The absence of this sense of process is suggested by the simple verb forms, the avoidance, in general, of participial construction and the progressive form of verbs.

In two respects Caliban is closer to Browning than to his own dam Sycorax; unlike her, he conceives that a deity may take on a personality and be a creator, though Setebos is a cruel creator; and, unlike her, he argues that death ends pain. He rejects her idea of eternal punishment or eternal feasting in a life beyond. Thus Caliban alternates between primitive awe and something very much like an enlightened realism, and this to some extent accounts for the ironic mixture of modernity and primitivism in his character. Like Butler and Paley, Caliban, as Michael Timko has pointed out, fails to move beyond empirical evidence to an intuitive grasp of God's love and instead remains trapped in his own logic.

Caliban's feeling of weakness (l. 172) is almost a parody of that human sense of inadequacy which, in Browning's view, induces a need for a loving God. Caliban's envisioning of Setebos as a creator echoes Aprile's understanding that "God is the perfect poet, / Who in his person acts his own creations" (*Paracelsus*, II, 648-49). But neither weakness nor power, in Caliban's limited understanding, subserves the ends of Good. Caliban's emulation of Setebos as Creator shows the same random and arbitrary cruelty which he sees in all of Setebos's actions. In taking on the role of creator and fashioner, Caliban becomes a kind of primitive artist; his is the state of existence in which poetry and prophecy are virtually interchangeable functions. "In some old languages," Carlyle had declared, ". . . *Vates* means both Prophet and Poet," and Caliban would seem to be a type of primitive and, at times, comically inept *Vates*.³ As he veers between primitive and modern views, so does he shift back and forth between an objective view of the world outside him and what seems to be an objective insight into "the One above him," a contrast emphasized by the shifts back and forth between first and third person. But the One above him is his own creation and hence anything but what Browning, in his essay on Shelley, had called "the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth." For Setebos, as a projection of Caliban, shares some of the latter's limitations; a partial Creator only, "He cannot change His cold," any more than Caliban can escape the power of Prospero.

In lines 1-68, Caliban, relatively relaxed, lies at ease and contemplates with simple wonder the world about him. Like David in "Saul," he is aware of a force in nature that calls forth unrestrained awe, if not, in Caliban's case, joy. As he draws nearer to his reflections on Setebos's apparent interventions in the daily

order of things, Caliban shifts to the first person to imagine himself drinking the mash of gourd-fruit, honeycomb, and pods and falling back into a state of pleasant delirium in which he can, at will, "make a live bird out of clay." The procedure is a mockery of poetic inspiration, a mockery which recurs in Sludge's enjoyment of Hiram Horsefall's champagne; like Arnold's strayed reveller, seeking release from the burden of the self, Caliban finds pleasure in the intoxicating fumes which put him on a level with the gods. Here the first person form suggests self-confidence, but that mood is soon to be dissipated.

To Caliban, as to so many of Browning's dilettantes, creation offers a way of controlling other creatures through the fancies of the moment. Such a control, like that of Setebos, may be called into question either by a rebellious creature or by a superior force to which the creator cannot aspire. Caliban cannot maintain the illusion forever. For a time, he can play roles, pretending to be Prospero guarding a "lumpish," blinded sea-beast which, with some modicum of ironic self-awareness, he calls Caliban. His pleasure in craft also helps to prolong the illusion, a means by which he may for a time ignore the otherwise oppressive burden of an inferior, thwarted existence. But his escapism is as surely doomed as the woven wattles which he has fenced together to keep the she-tortoises from laying their eggs on the beach—a suggestion that Caliban's work, like that of the imagined Setebos, is ultimately barren and life-denying. The first person pronoun recurs, this time reflecting the sense of impending malignity.⁴ The random wave which destroys his fence foreshadows the destruction of his incipient religious insight at the end of the storm; on the verge of revelation, Caliban falls back on a vain attempt to propitiate a deity he has constructed himself. Incapable of maintaining the dramatic pose, even the separateness of the *I* which Tennyson described as the first important conception in the developing child, Caliban is unable to translate either religious fear or artistic impulse into a coherent faith.⁵ Though his name may be an anagram for *cannibal*, as critics have suggested, the choice of name is also reminiscent of his polar opposite, Cleon, the highly sophisticated man of letters whose subtle intellect brings him to an impasse curiously like that of the primitively rational savage.

Mr. Sludge, by contrast, plays on the need of others for material reassurance; he thus becomes a kind of Victorian inversion of Prospero. To be sure, he is neither sophisticated pagan nor primi-

tive savage, but he is, nonetheless, a uniquely Browningsque creation, the shallow modern, the self-serving casuist who is one of the many by-products of the Victorian loss of faith and search for new values.⁶ His monologue gives both art and religion a new twist in *Dramatis Personae*, and his preoccupation with concepts of "fancy" and "fact" marks the poem as a kind of poetic laboratory for *The Ring and the Book*. In his enjoyment of worldly comfort and his search for a good commercial bargain Sludge resembles Bishop Blougram, but he does not have the bishop's good breeding, his intellectual subtlety, or his ironic self-awareness. The endpiece of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" had shown Blougram a believer, with all his weaknesses, who tempered his arguments to the journalist's understanding; but the concluding paragraph of "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'" seems to indicate that Sludge has truly become the victim of his own lies ("I don't know where my head is . . ."). On the other hand, his audience—not only Horsefall, the actual auditor, but his previous clientele—comes off no better; the deceived warrant the deception. And to some extent Sludge, like Caliban, commands our pity, for like Caliban he is incapable of more than a half-superstitious faith. His spiritualism, a response to the needs of his audience for the assurance that divine intervention is possible in this later age, is partly hoax, to be sure, but partly also a form of wishful thinking in which he is as surely imprisoned as is Caliban in his savagery. His fraud also provides an ironic contrast with St. John's attempt to anticipate the argument of future skeptics.

In an effort to escape public unveiling of his chicanery, Sludge pleads with his irate former patron, Hiram Horsefall, confessing that Horsefall's anger is just (a confession which he later attempts to retract) and offering to tell "the whole truth and nought else" (l. 56). The mock-legal oath establishes Sludge's—and Browning's—method at the outset, because the definition of truth slips and slides throughout the poem; the only way in which Sludge really tells the truth, as Browning would define it, is through his unconscious revelation of his character. Sludge then begins his defense.

His first tactic is to stress the credulity of the "curious gentlefolk" whom he humbugs. Skeptical of what could be readily believed, they are all too eager to embrace the unbelievable—Sludge's notion of the supernatural. The force of their opinion silences even the skeptic, and David Sludge, who says he has seen a ghost, becomes the instrument of their willful self-deceit; even his mistakes

are turned to proof in favor of the spirit world. In the description of how Sludge was rescued from insignificance, Browning may be recalling Lippo's description of how the monastery befriended him, but needless to say the end results are very different.

Nonetheless, "there's something in real truth . . . / One casts a wistful eye at" (ll. 382-83). Thus tacitly admitting the difference between "real" truth and his false brand of it, Sludge argues that far from his having corrupted his patrons, they have corrupted him. He has been made dependent on the comforts they provide for him. Nor in any case will they confess to having been duped, so there is little point in Horsefall's exposing himself by exposing Sludge—an ingenious argument which apparently tells on the American. If his audience has been cheated, it has also been flattered; it has profited from his games.

Sludge's second tactic is to argue that he does indeed offer his audience a kind of faith. He begins by declaring that

with my *phenomena*
I laid the atheist sprawling on his back,
Propped up Saint Paul, or, at least, Swedenborg!

[ll. 665-67]

The telltale phrase "propped up" suggests the rather provisional nature of Sludge's truth. Has he not, after all, pointed to the existence of the soul, a spirit world above this one? Browning draws a fine line between Sludge's deception of others and the element of genuine belief that he has in his own quackery:

I somehow vomit truth today,
This trade of mine—I don't know, can't be sure
But there was something in it, tricks and all!
Really, I want to light up my own mind.
They were tricks,—true, but what I mean to add
Is also true.

[ll. 808-13]

The alliterative pattern—*trade, trick, true*—shows his habit of running together unlike ideas. Thus a commercial bargain is alternately a sham and a way of seeing into truth; yet at the same time truth is "vomited" and thus reduced to the level of the other excrement in the poem: the offal in the gutter (l. 264), the "good fun and wholesome mud" which he prefers to polite society (l. 394), the "smut" on one's nose which is equated with a piece of gossip about

someone else (l. 502), the "rotten of your natures, all of you" (l. 546), the warning "filth-speck" which would have warned his audience of his trickery if they had been in the mood for warnings (l. 700), the "dung-heaps" from which the literary man picks out pearls, smoothing "muck" into an "artistic richness" (ll. 746-57), and finally Mr. "Sludge" himself, the polluted medium through whom Browning manages to convey by indirection his own thoughts on art and religion.

Sludge's comments on the spirit world are directed in part at an obsession of his age, that of the possibility of reunion with the dead. A mid-Victorian reader of the poem might have recalled numerous passages of *In Memoriam*, perhaps particularly those in which Tennyson employs the image of the hands reaching out for comfort (Sections I, VII, XIV, XXX, LXXXV). Mr. Sludge reverts to the same image again and again, beginning with his resentful outcry to his angry patron, "Your thumbs are through my windpipe, sir!" (l. 17). Sludge promises cheap and ready consolation:

Sludge begins
At your entreaty with your dearest dead,
The little voice set lisping once again,
The tiny hand made feel for yours once more,
The poor lost image brought back, plain as dreams

[ll. 471-75]

But if the hand is a symbol of such reunion for the bereaved parent, it is also used to suggest the manipulation of an audience through trickery: "I don't know if I move your hand sometimes / When the spontaneous writing spreads so far" (ll. 1312-13); "Had I seen, perhaps, what hand was holding mine, / Leading me whither, I had died of fright" (ll. 1290-91). This is another instance of Sludge's ambiguous use of words; at the outset he has sworn at Horsefall and at the end he pleads sycophantically, "One—one kiss / O' the hand that saves me!" (ll. 1494-95). Like such abstractions as *truth*, *fact*, and *fancy*, the concrete, physical word *hand* is used according to the needs of Sludge's arguments at a given moment. It does not, as it does for James Lee's wife, provide an avenue into awareness of God's purposes, but merely confirms Sludge's status as a trickster.

More important is the larger theme which this word embodies. When he begins to argue that his occupation is truly spiritual, Sludge asserts:

. . . the first fact

We're taught is, there's a world beside this world,
 With spirits, not mankind, for tenantry;
 That much within that world once sojourned here,
 That all upon this world will visit there,
 And therefore that we, bodily here below,
 Must have exactly such an interest
 In learning what may be the ways o' the world
 Above us, as the disembodied folk
 Have (by all analogic likelihood)
 In watching how things go in the old home
 With us, their sons, successors, and what not.
 Oh yes, with added powers probably,
 Fit for the novel state,—old loves grown pure,
 Old interests understood aright,—they watch!
 Eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to help,
 Proportionate to advancement: they're ahead,
 That's all—do what we do, but noblier done—
 Use plate, whereas we eat our meals off delf,
 (To use a figure).

[ll. 814–33]

Surely at this point a Victorian reader, again, could have recalled how in a number of sections of *In Memoriam* (XLIV, LI, LXIV, LXXXV) Tennyson speculates on the nature of the next life and its relationship to the life of this world. To anyone who knows Tennyson's poem, Sludge's words approach parody. The simple yet elevated diction with which the Poet Laureate treats the theme is certainly a far cry from Sludge's colloquialisms, his self-conscious and clumsy rhetorical flourishes ("by all analogic likelihood" . . . "to use a figure") and flat metaphors. The spirits are "tenantry," a term which suggests the kind of commercial bargains Sludge has struck by his pseudo religion; and though he begins by calling the spirits "disembodied," he is unable—just as Caliban is unable—to keep the argument on an abstract plane. As a result, a few lines later we learn that the spirits have "eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to help" and that they eat off plate instead of "delf." The result is a kind of spiritual peep show which amply fulfils the promises of the medium's peculiar art. This same sort of "analogic likelihood" leads Sludge to postulate spirit-appearances: "Since Samuel's ghost appeared to Saul, of course / My brother's spirit may appear to me," he imagines a customer saying, and the argument, of course, reverses St. John's position that miracles are no longer necessary as helps to faith.

In successive sections, Sludge argues for an "unseen agency" which moves its puppets around, but he also defends providential

intervention in even the most trivial appearances. This, in turn, seems to be a kind of parody of the doctrine Browning earlier enunciated through the figure of Pippa; her postulate, and David's in "Saul," that God is present even in the humble and commonplace, is misused by this David to defend trickery. Divine Providence, Sludge seems to say, has made him a medium where others might be painters. He sounds like Johannes Agricola turned card-player: "It's pure grace, my luck" (l. 989), and the equation of *grace* and *luck* is only one of many cases in which he perverts traditional theological vocabulary for his own ends. The word *spirit*, for example, occurs throughout the poem, but sometimes it is used in the older sense of *soul* while at other times it is the sham object conjured up by the medium. Sludge swears upon his own soul, but goes on to explain that his soul is ruined, for "such tricks sap, honeycomb the soul" (l. 1272). At the beginning he pleads for Horsefall's *mercy*, elsewhere alluding to "the hand that *saves* me" (l. 1495), while in the lying tale that he constructs for himself at the end it is Horsefall who howls for mercy and hopes he'll "have grace given him to repent" (l. 1516). The terms *faith* and *doubt* also occur, usually in contexts relevant to the efficacy of Sludge's practice rather than his religious faith. He refers to his audience, in one of his more flattering asides, as the "faithful" (l. 364). The unbelievers,

men emasculate,
Blank of belief, who played, as eunuchs use
With superstition safely

[ll. 734-36]

have posed as "promisers of fair play" and dealt with him as Athens did with—St. Paul! They were "too shrewd" to support him as "proselytes." In yet another passage, Sludge exploits the language of theology and biblical allusion to portray himself, rather amusingly, as Moses:

Their faith was pledged, acquaintance too apprised,
All but the last step ventured, kerchiefs waved,
And Sludge called "pet": 'twas easier marching on
To the promised land [;] join those who, Thursday next,
Meant to meet Shakespeare; better follow Sludge—
Prudent, oh sure!—on the alert, how else?—
But making for the mid-bog, all the same!

[ll. 704-10]

He finds warrant for his superstitions in the Bible, converting the stars from symbols of divine presence into signs for the convenience of almanac makers (ll. 917–19). In ways like these, Sludge makes himself a preacher of true faith, a prophet urging revelations upon the people, while simultaneously admitting that his own soul has been bought and sold.

The idea of buying and selling, indeed, is one of the most pervasive in the poem, and recurs throughout in the use of imagery drawn from trade and commerce—an ironic parallel with Tennyson's reflections in *In Memoriam* on his “commerce with the dead” (LXXXV). At the beginning, Sludge is trying to strike a commercial bargain with Horsefall to avoid exposure. His life has been a succession of such bargains; having once lied about his contact with the spirit world, he's “done for, bought and sold henceforth, / The old good easy jog-trot way” (ll. 423–24). He refers contemptuously to the writer who “half-believes” for the sake of the book, public attention, and “the cash that's God's sole solid in this world” (ll. 746–53), without denying that he himself views cash in just that way. As his audacity mounts, he compares himself to a prostitute; why should he feel gratitude any more than she “to the greenhorn and the bully” (ll. 783–84):

All and each
Pay, compliment, protect from the police:
And how she hates them for their pains, like me!

ll. 788–90]

Providence, of course, interferes even by bestowing small monetary blessings:

I've sharpened up my sight
To spy a providence in the fire's going out,
The kettle's boiling, the dime's sticking fast
Despite the hole i' the pocket. Call such facts
Fancies, too petty a work for Providence,
And those same thanks which you exact from me
Prove too prodigious payment: thanks for what,
If nothing guards and guides us little men?
No, no, sir! You must put away your pride,
Resolve to let Sludge into partnership!

[ll. 961–70]

And he goes on to illustrate his point with the farmer who, regulating his actions by superstition instead of careful and allegedly scientific calculation, “saved hay and corn, made cent. per cent.

thereby" (l. 1050). Sludge later accused Horsefall of killing his mother "to get this house of hers, and many a note / Like these" (ll. 1506-9). His point of view infects even the most neutral terms; in defending his belief in an unseen agency, he reasons about "the greater godsend, what you call / The serious gains and losses of my life" (l. 905), and asks what the world is "worth" if one does not cheat to make it more pleasant (l. 1348). Earlier, however, Sludge has defined cheating as being "found out" (l. 548); here as elsewhere he is incapable of distinguishing motive from act. Terms like *loss*, *gain*, *worth* all carry the distinctive connotations of Sludge's selfishness and conceit, although they can clearly have a religious overtone as well. Such connotations cheapen his argument that divine force is behind what he does, and the "fierce vindictive scribble of red" that confronts the religious waverer in "Easter Day" (Section XV) is here replaced by

A tin-foil battle, a strip of greasy silk,
With a bit of wire and knob of brass, and there's
Your dollar's-worth of lightning!

[ll. 1124-26]

If preachers then argue that thunderbolts do good to men, that indeed "all things minister / To man," so much the better. Their text, "We are His children," draws an approving "Amen" from Sludge, who then proceeds, "How shall I act a child's part properly?" (l. 1143)

The word *act* comes at a critical point in the poem, for Sludge is about to employ his third and final tactic. This is to identify his occupation as another species of art, not unlike what literary men engage in—even as he denigrates the occupation of literary men. "Acting" is a key concept here, because Sludge uses the term without distinguishing between its root sense of activity (moral action) and the sort of performance we expect in a play; furthermore, he does not distinguish the actor's legitimate performance from the mimicry and cheap stage-managing in which he engages. He confesses, "I know I acted wrongly" (l. 1481), but only a few lines earlier he has asserted triumphantly of his superiority to literary men, "Sludge . . . acts the books they write: the more his praise!" (ll. 1441-42). When the theatrical comparison does occur in the poem, it is linked not only with wirepulling but with his all-consuming commercial instinct. His audience, Sludge asserts in self-defense,

paid for it,
 And not prodigiously; the price o' the play,
 Not counting certain pleasant interludes,
 Was scarce a vulgar play's worth. When you buy
 The actor's talent, do you dare propose
 For his soul beside? Whereas my soul you buy!

ll. 645-50]

Later on, he declares with all honesty that his care is for himself:

Myself am whole and sole reality
 Inside a raree-show and a market-mob
 Gathered about it

ll. 909-11]

Even though Sludge attempts to defend his "performance" (l. 238) with metaphors derived from art ("Really mere novel-writing of a sort, / Acting, or improvising, make-believe, / Surely not downright cheaterly" [ll. 427-29]), he either denies, or fails to realize, the difference between *trompe l'oeil* and true artistic rendering. When the spirits descend, the shoe "goes on, not quite like perhaps, / But so near, that the very difference piques" (ll. 1410-11)—a statement which recalls the literalists who poke at St. Lawrence's torturers in Lippo's painting. Only less revealing than this basic confusion is Sludge's failure to distinguish artistic media—novel-writing, acting, improvising in any form—from each other; they are alike reducible to "make-believe." What Sludge does can be described, he claims, as "fancying, fable-making," the "brightening-up / Each dull old bit of fact that drops its shine" (ll. 190-93), as a "mild bit of romancing-work" (l. 252), the "dance of bubbles gay about our prow" (l. 287), but as he continues he attempts to add a dignity in which these allusions, suggesting as they do a form of idle diversion, are notably deficient.

The first important instance of Sludge's attempt to attain high seriousness comes when he describes the imaginary judgment of others regarding his function. A medium, or so Sludge imagines his audience saying, is

". . . a means,
 "Good, bad, indifferent, still the only means
 "Spirits can speak by; he may misconceive,
 "Stutter and stammer,—he's their Sludge and drudge,
 "Take him or leave him; they must hold their peace,
 "Or else, put up with having knowledge strained
 "To half-expression through his ignorance."

[ll. 332-38]

In another metaphor he is like a mill into which the doubters pitch chaff, getting rubbish in return. He is very like the literary man whom he describes, smoothing "muck" into "artistic richness" (ll. 756-57). He is not merely a passive medium but a seer (ll. 875, 955-64). He has been singled out by Providence: "Such kissing goes by favour" (l. 1056). Like the poet of Valladolid, he is "eyes, ears, mouth of me, one gaze and gape, / Nothing eludes me, everything's a hint, / Handle and help" (ll. 1013-15). Not only is he more sensitive than most, but more actively percipient; with the aid of "practice" superadded to flesh and spirit, he guesses "what's going on outside the veil" (ll. 1243-44). He says that like most inspired poets, "I speak so much more than I intend" (l. 1318). As Sludge warms to his topic, he falls into an occasional rhyme ("I'm inspired somehow"), but here his doggerel merely emphasizes the difference between him and a true artist such as Lippo, whose snatches of song reinforce our understanding of the painter's wide-ranging artistry.

In defending his own claims to artistic sensitivity, his ability to make fine discriminations, Sludge is contemptuous of the discriminations he senses in his hostile hearer:

You'd fain distinguish between gift and gift,
Washington's oracle and Sludge's itch
O' the elbow when at whist he ought to trump?
With Sludge it's too absurd? *Fine, draw the line*
Somewhere, but, sir, your somewhere is not mine!

[ll. 1179-83 (emphasis in original)]

Sludge thus tacitly acknowledges the relativity of all perception; indeed he pushes the argument so far as to say that he cannot always even be sure he is speaking; and there is something frighteningly solipsistic in his complacent words, "Myself am whole and sole reality" (l. 909), for to grant his definition of reality is to go beyond relativism to abolish the meaning of words themselves. His own art, which is a lying artifice, solves the problem of relativity by banishing all that roots it in the actual:

Just so wild Indians picked up, piece by piece,
The fact in California, the fine gold
That underlay the gravel—hoarded these,
But never made a system stand, nor dug!
So wise men hold out in each hollowed palm
A handful of experience, sparkling fact
They can't explain; and since their rest of life

Is all explainable, what proof in this?
 Whereas I take the fact, the grain of gold,
 And fling away the dirty rest of life,
 And add this grain to the grain each fool has found
 O' the million other such philosophers,—
 Till I see gold, all gold and only gold,
 Truth questionless though unexplainable,
 And the miraculous proved the commonplace!

[ll. 1207–21]

The passage is central to our understanding of Sludge's method. For the artist, in the view Browning was to develop in *The Ring and the Book*, requires not only gold but "gold's alloy" if he is to give his subject the truth and permanence of art. Sludge's view, by contrast, is perfectly appropriate to his purposes; his own art is a mere dressing-up of the actual, a suppression of those inconvenient facts through which alone man comes to religious, artistic, and personal maturity. It is, in Sludge's own words, "trimming, turning, furbishing up / And polishing over," in short, "tinkering" (ll. 1350–53). Art in his debased practice does not prove the commonplace to be the miraculous, as Pippa and David in "Saul" would see it, but rather reduces the miraculous to the level of the commonplace. Sludge does not elevate the natural, but degrades the spiritual. His vision of gold is simply a translation of his lust for a good bargain into hackneyed poetic metaphor, just as for him alchemy is a means of profit (ll. 119–25). Sludge has mocked Providence by attributing to it an active concern with trivial matters of comfort; now he degrades art by making it a dressing-up of ugly muck. Find the artist his "crude stuff," and

when you recognize
 Your lie again, you'll doff your hat to it,
 Dressed out for company.

[ll. 758–60]

His tendency to cheapen words shows up even more in his use of the term *truth*—which I have examined already in terms of its religious connotations, but which is also invoked in this poem as an artistic proposition. But whereas in *The Ring and the Book* the poet argues that artistic truth is a blending of fancy and fact, Sludge debases that truth by identifying it with the spurious "facts" of his profession. Elsewhere, whenever candor suits his purposes, he confesses that he looks wistfully now and then at "real truth" (l. 382), and remarks, "I too sigh at times / Wish I were stouter, could tell truth nor flinch" (ll. 1262–63). When he is in this vein,

he justifies his perversions of truth by arguing that it is the end product of his lies (ll. 1309–10). He alternates between an insistence that he is a source of truth and an admission that he has played false, between a contempt for the artist (“picker-out of pearl / From dung heaps” [ll. 746–47]) and an elevation of his shams to the artistic level. In one interesting passage, he argues that he has put down the atheist and skeptic with his tricks, and explains how he baffles them:

No use in being squeamish: lie yourself
Erect your buttress just as wide o' the line,
Your side, as they build up the wall on theirs;
Where both meet, midway in a point, is truth
High overhead: so, take your room, pile bricks,
Lie! [ll. 671–76]

There are few more remarkable instances of a Browning-like distortion of Browning. Sludge converts the familiar argument that truth and falsehood are interdependent into the curious assertion that truth is the mid-point between two forms of falsehood. But he never stays with any particular argument longer than it meets his needs. Between the Sludge who says, “My fault is that I tell too plain a truth” (l. 1195) and the one who reflects, “I’ve always vowed, after the minute’s lie / And the end’s gain,—truth should be mine henceforth” (ll. 1340–41)—between these two, there is no essential difference. His own argument is a kind of never-never land between truth and falsehood. It ironically validates in its language and strategy Sludge’s assertion that “every cheat’s inspired, and every lie / Quick with a germ of truth” (ll. 1324–25).

Sludge’s defense of his artistry is, of course, related to his attitude toward his audience—an audience which, as I have already indicated, is worthy of him. To characterize both it and himself, Sludge frequently employs imagery drawn from the animal kingdom. Browning’s own choice of a name, Hiram H. Horsefall, implies the character of the auditor, who rides a “hot hardmouthed horrid horse” (l. 1252) and is described in terms that suggest not only an unbridled temper but a kind of assertive masculinity in the face of which Sludge’s self-deprecations and fawning attentions are crudely sycophantic.⁷ The medium is by turns, in his own words, a “worm” (l. 72) or “vermin” (l. 568), by implication a lap pet of the ladies (l. 271), a cat whose only resource for self-defense is to scratch (ll. 558–59); he is also like a “showman’s ape” (l. 600). His hearers are birds on a peacock porch (l. 155) crowing approval (l. 221); the

deceived are geese (ll. 354, 643), shorn sheep (l. 630), and blind beetles (l. 1250), while the skeptic is a "black sheep" (l. 220) and an ass (l. 378). Accompanying these images are suggestions of voraciousness: the gullible auditors are all too ready to "gulp down" David (ll. 213, 227), while Sludge himself, profiting by this readiness, is like a "hack" crammed with corn (ll. 294–95), "bought and sold . . . / The old good easy, jog-trot way" (ll. 423–24). The term *hack*, however, also reminds us of Horsefall, whom Sludge is, in a manner of speaking, cramming with his doctrines; Sludge has "fallen" from grace but his patron falls for the plea for money and the promise of silence at the end. The most revealing metaphor, however, is Sludge's description of himself as an anteater (ll. 539–43, 1058–61) whose "soft, innocent, warm, moist, impassible" tongue collects facts about his customers which will aid in their deception.

The references to animals and biological processes thus cast additional light on Browning's intention. We recall that in "Caliban upon Setebos," Caliban had hypothesized that some day Setebos might "grow into" the Quiet "as grubs grow butterflies" (ll. 247–48), and a nearly identical phrase appears here in one of the many passages comparing the role of the medium to that of the artist:

Though I say, "lies" all these, at this first stage,
 'Tis just for science' sake: I call such grubs
 By the name of what they'll turn to, dragonflies.

[ll. 185–87]

The term *stage* hints at something like evolutionary doctrine, but Sludge's science, like his art, bears the unmistakable imprint of his personality and occupation. Just as the poem, so to speak, reduces the gold of artistic truth to the sludge of the medium, the microscope reduces the mystery of God's providence to an indistinct cell in which primary functions are undifferentiated; God, in fact, becomes the product of an evolutionary reversal. Sludge's use of the "spyglass" thus serves a function quite opposite from that of St. John's "optic glass":

Somebody turns our spyglass round, or else
 Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:
 We find great things are made of little things,
 And little things go lessening till at last
 Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now?
 We talk of mould that heaps the mountain, mites
 That through the mould, and God that makes the mites.
 The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst,
 The simplest of creations, just a sac

That's mouth, heart, legs and belly at once, yet lives
And feels, and could do neither, we conclude,
If simplified still further one degree:
The small becomes the dreadful and immense!

[ll. 1110-22]

Sludge has, unwittingly, already applied the same sort of process to himself: "I'm eyes, ears, mouth of me, one gaze and gape"—a statement which reduces his total personality to a kind of voracious receptacle for sensory impressions. The small is always "the dreadful and immense" in Browning—one may recall Pippa's snail on its thorn—but hardly in the way Sludge asserts it to be.

The grand climax of Sludge's monologue comes when he defends his forswearing of struggle, preferring to assume the garb of a mock Prospero (or, as Isobel Armstrong suggests, a latter-day Moses) with "harlequin's pasteboard sceptre" (l. 1392). There is a cynical force to his argument, "No lifelong labour now / As the price of worse than nothing!" (ll. 1400-1). By renouncing struggle and playing on the imperceptiveness of his audience with its eagerness for cheap tricks, the gold-grubber alchemizes himself, becomes herald of a new "Golden Age," obliterating annoying facts and spinning fancies to his heart's content. Sludge's monologue thus works toward a crowning vision of glory which parodies the concluding sections of "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto." There is more than a hint of self-mockery on Browning's part here. Perhaps the very vividness with which Sludge is portrayed, the compelling power of his defense of petty ambitions and sleight-of-hand tricks, owes less to Browning's distaste for Daniel Home the medium than to a projection of conflicting and long-suppressed impulses in himself.⁸ Such impulses, if given free play, might have tempted him to settle for easy success and petty aims, what in "One Word More" he had called "emphatic warrant . . . / [the] right-arm's rod-sweep." He might have been in his own fashion Sludge rather than Moses. On that level, at least, this brilliantly sustained poem would seem to direct us to the familiar "There, but for the grace of God" But it is not sufficient to leave the poem there. Mr. Sludge's monologue not only inverts the religious vision of "A Death in the Desert" but cheapens the inchoate yet genuine efforts of a Caliban to understand a reality larger than himself. And Sludge's selfishness, recalling but far exceeding that of the young woman in "Gold Hair," exemplifies the extent to which not only religion, but the religious vision of the true artist, can become debased.

4. Imagery, Structure, and Theme: The Unity of *Dramatis Personae*

WHILE "MR. SLUDGE, 'the Medium,'" recalls in its vivid characterization many of the major monologues of *Men and Women*, on balance the soliloquy and sermon forms are more common in *Dramatis Personae*, perhaps because they permit the reader to concentrate on the ideas the speaker wishes to convey without the distraction which is posed by the presence of an audience. James Lee's wife, Abt Vogler, Caliban, the speaker of "Prospice," can muse on their emergent or fully developed philosophies, can speak truth as it appears to them. Our attention has been redirected from the strategies of debate to private reflection, the person as he or she communicates with himself or herself. One reason may lie in the fact that *Dramatis Personae*, appearing in the context of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's still-recent death, constitutes a reexamination of faith—not only, through indirection, the poet's own faith, but faith as a current intellectual and moral issue. The poems in the volume are shot through with a sense of loss and a need to affirm the reality and persistence of personality in a world of flux and change. Collectively, whatever their form, they constitute Browning's *In Memoriam*, along with the later *La Saisiaz*. Mrs. Lee, Abt Vogler, Rabbi ben Ezra, St. John all confront that need and attempt, in their different ways, to meet it; Mr. Sludge profits from it. The reason for soliloquy may be more than just its appropriateness as a vehicle for the candid expression of ideas. Soliloquy also tends to emphasize the isolation as well as the solitude of the speakers; it may be one way of focusing on the severance of human contacts. Mrs. Lee appears to address her husband only *as if* he were present, while St. John at times seems to move in a kind of shadowy middle ground between sermon and soliloquy; attempting to reach his hearers, he is at the same time pondering his physical separation from Christ. And finally, soliloquy keeps history at a distance; in

Dramatis Personae we move into a world almost wholly marked off by private time. Only in "A Death in the Desert" do we have some sense of other generations, and this is because St. John is addressing himself to the role of Christ in future history.

The intense physicality which runs through much of the volume reflects Browning's preoccupation with this question: the impermanence of individual human beings, and yet the necessity of affirming something permanent in human relationships. The avenues to a solution, or more accurately to a series of solutions which are partial, lie through our response to the multiple voices of the volume, and the dilemmas are those of the artist and the quester for religious certainty as well as of ordinary men and women. Yet beneath the words of these many persons of the drama lie common imagistic patterns, and such patterns, suggesting different apprehensions of the same underlying reality, give the volume a continuity through devices of shared imagery, allusion, and metaphor.

One of Browning's techniques in the volume is to return again and again to a single image through which we can chart the gradual elevation or debasement of a particular idea. An instance is provided by the numerous allusions to the hand. We have already noted how in *James Lee's Wife* the hand suggests either an attempt to reach out or a form of rejection, but it is with the former idea that the poem concludes as the wife, addressing her husband (perhaps only in her imagination), says that he "who never lifted the hand in vain— / Will hold mine yet, from over the sea" (ll. 351-52). In "Too Late" the speaker, likewise in his imagination, takes the woman's hand, kneels, and kisses it as a symbol of his continuing tribute. Rabbi ben Ezra uses the image as a symbol for the outreach of divinity. It is implicit in the metaphor of God as the potter whose wheel shapes man's life, but more explicitly the rabbi also declares, moving from general to personal statement, "Our times are in His hand" (l. 4) and "My times be in Thy hand" (l. 190). At the end of "A Death in the Desert" the commentator wonders

. . . if, for every finger of thy hands,
"There be not found, that day the world shall end,
"Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ's word
"That He will grow incorporate with all"

[ll. 679-82]

Here too the implied metaphor ("word"="hand") suggests the ways in which one searches for divine condescension, for that same

outrach of divinity which the rabbi confidently asserts. But in "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" the insistence on the ability of a vast mystery to incorporate itself into a thing of flesh and blood becomes degraded. "Don't take your hand away, / Through yours I surely kiss your mother's hand," Sludge pleads with Horsefall (ll. 41-42), and in arguing for divine intervention as a proof of the authenticity of the medium's art, Sludge resorts to a metaphor which is a giveaway of his own cheap gamesmanship:

. . . What projects the billiard-balls?
 "A cue," you answer: "Yes, a cue," said I:
 "But what hand, off the cushion, moved the cue?
 "What unseen agency, outside the world,
 "Prompted its puppets to do this and that . . . ?"

[ll. 895-99]

Elsewhere he sees himself as a kind of god for his audience, perhaps Michelangelo's God giving life:

Hear these simpletons,
 That's all I beg, before my work's begun,
 Before I've touched them with my finger-tip!

[ll. 713-15]

We cannot help but compare this with a statement like that of Abt Vogler, who portrays the "finger of God" as creating the world (Stanza VII), while the musician reenacts divine process in framing a "star" out of the different sounds that make up a chord. The contrast between the testimony of Abt Vogler and that of Mr. Sludge marks the distance we have come, the extent to which the challenges posed by our mortality have become converted into an unhealthy dependence on materiality.

A similar debasement of a particular image occurs in references to the *mouth*. St. John is said to refer to himself as one "whom Christ's mouth taught" as he is now trying "to taste again the truth of things." But the original force of Christ's teaching may become dissipated in future generations, and one fears again the ravages of time; not only is the original story altered in John's own words, but his survivors—says the narrator—in turn will misread him if they believe he is still alive,

Either mistaking what was darkly spoke
 At ending of his book, as he relates,
 Or misconceiving somewhat of this speech
 Scattered from mouth to mouth, as I suppose.

[ll. 657-60]

The speaker of "Prospice," anticipating an encounter with death, declares defiantly, "Let me taste the whole of it," a statement reflecting a willingness not only to endure, but indeed to savor, the last great combat. But the closely associated images of mouth, throat, taste, and tongue take on a destructive force in Caliban's allusions to the "pie with the long tongue / That pricks deep into oakworts for a worm" (ll. 50-51) or to the wave that "lolloped out its large tongue, / And licked [his] whole labour flat" (ll. 209-10). And Mr. Sludge, telling how he collects facts to use in seances, advises his hearer to

Be lazily alive,
Open-mouthed, like my friend the ant-eater,
Letting all nature's loosely-guarded notes
Settle and, slick, be swallowed!

[ll. 1058-61]

Sludge also makes the same claim for his speech that St. John has made for Christ's, declaring that his own mediumship is more than what his detractors would call "'the usual talking through the mouth, / Or writing by the hand'" (ll. 408-9). In short, the terms closely associated with the mouth may allude either to physical (digestive and gustatory) processes or to the act and substance of speech; threats to one's ability to speak or swallow, or the voraciousness of other mouths, are closely associated with the fear of death itself. The speaker of "Prospice" anticipates that moment of "the fog in my throat, / The mist in my face," and Sludge gasps when Horsefall tries to throttle him, "Your hands are through my windpipe, sir!" (l. 18). As Caliban lies trembling before what he interprets to be Setebos's judgment, "his teeth meet through his upper lip," a physical reaction which capsulizes the ultimately self-intimidating vision of the malign universe he has hypothesized (l. 293).

Another important image is that of the face or likeness of a face, an image which is of culminating importance, as I shall note later, in "Apparent Failure" and the "Epilogue." For Mrs. Lee, the image of the face is a reminder of loss (Section IX); her face, she fears, will not live in her husband's memory after their separation. The speaker of "The Worst of It" will deny his beloved a glimpse of his face should they meet in paradise. In "Too Late," the speaker remembers Edith's face. In "A Death in the Desert," Pamphylax describes how they placed the dying John in the mid-most grotto,

since noon's light
Reached there a little, and we would not lose
The last of what might happen on his face.

[ll. 26–28]

John's task, of course, is to reassure his fearful audience that the light of Christ, the Face, is not receding into the past but growing in power and truth. The human loss, however, remains, for Pamphylax will never again see John with his "divine regard," and those who

look again to find that face,
Beloved John's to whom I ministered
Somewhere in life about the world

[ll. 654–56]

are in error. In "A Face," Browning contrasts the idealism, the static perfection of the face that one finds against the shadeless "pale gold" of early Tuscan art, with the angel faces of Correggio poised to see "some wonder momentarily / Grow out, stand full, fade slow against the sky." Browning leaves the two parts of the poem severed, or at least joined only by implication; that beauty fades is only hinted in the initial *if*, but certainly in the death a few years later of Mrs. Patmore, who inspired the poem, art was fulfilled by life, and the poem for an album had become a *memento mori*. In the companion-piece, "A Likeness," the prosperous man reminiscing about his days in a garret is willing to disguise his most intimate feelings with a man-of-the-world gesture; he would give up the likeness because it would have been devalued by another's admiration. The feeling of loss persists, however much the speaker—perhaps one of Mr. Sludge's "philosophic diners-out"—would conceal it, for this has been a "face to lose youth for, to occupy age / With the dream of, meet death with . . ." But if the face is generally a symbol of loss, it may also suggest a judgment; hence Sludge, fearfully confronting the "terrible face" of his patron, then is able to sigh with relief, "Now your face clears!" (ll. 11, 40).

Closely associated with all these allusions is the imagery of sight and light, and of fire and darkness. James Lee's wife, pondering the ineffable mystery of an existence characterized by transitory relationships, addresses her husband, "Look in my eyes! / Wilt thou change too?" (ll. 8–9). There is no answering reassurance, as is shown by her imagining a new song on an old story:

"My wisdom has bidden your pleasure good-bye,
"Which will turn up next in a laughing eye
"And why should you look beyond?"

[ll. 119-21]

The speaker of "The Worst of It" wonders, "Are you still so fair? Have you still the eyes?" (l. 110), and St. John reportedly says that when he dies there will be no one alive " 'who saw with his eyes and handled with his hands / That which was from the first, the Word of Life' " (ll. 131-32). The speaker of "Prospice," imagining the actual physical process of dying, declares, "I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forebore, / And bade me creep past," while Mr. Sludge, in a different way, also regards human sight as a vehicle for perceiving the eternal:

I've sharpened up my sight
To spy a providence in the fire's going out,
The kettle's boiling, the dime's sticking fast
Despite the hole i' the pocket.

[ll. 961-64]

Such imagery, pervading the whole volume, deepens and extends the idea of vision, physical and metaphysical. It recalls the insistence, perhaps unique among the Gospels, on the idea of perception in the opening chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, where Christ is "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (i. 9). Supporting imagery associated with sun and warmth, darkness and cold, adds suggestions of fertility and sterility, promise and frustration. Fire may be a symbol of human transience, or alternatively it may come to represent the intermittently glimpsed light of God. Mrs. Lee imagines their home fire as a mockery to sailors tossed in storms off the coast, and her contemplation of the fireplace merges with a vision of disaster in which the planks of the ship of love separate and reveal hell beneath. To Caliban, looking "out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross / And recross till they weave a spider-web" (ll. 12-13), the "meshes of fire" prefigure the "fast invading fires" of the storm at the end of the poem in which, horror-stricken, he postulates a divine punishment for his speculations on the capriciousness of Setebos. For John, the torchlight of the Roman crowd lights up a single moment in which he is weighed in the balance and found wanting.¹ And in ironic contrast with Caliban's superstitious fear, Sludge's argument that God is present in little things leads him to a scorn of the manifestations of God's power:

Lightning, forsooth? No word more upon that!
 A tin-foil bottle, a strip of greasy silk,
 With a bit of wire and knob of brass, and there's
 Your dollar's worth of lightning! But the cyst—
 The life of the least of the little things?

[ll. 1123–27]

But it is fire, light, and warmth as creative forces that dominate in *Dramatis Personae*, as the figurative journey of the speaker of “Prospice” emblemizes. Mrs. Lee’s early remark that “the sun’s away” has both literal and metaphorical connotations; her task is to recapture the ability to see, to substitute an inner light of understanding for the light she has lost. The summer sun may kill or parch living things (V, i), and yet in the image of the “brown old earth” which basks in the sun (VII) we have an anticipation of both seasonal and personal regeneration. She recognizes that “God’s aglow, to the loving eyes, / In what was mere earth before” (ll. 90–91), and she sees the self-regenerating power of love in the blue and red grace of the insects. A human relationship may indeed be infused with this passing light and warmth; in “Too Late” the speaker imagines the woman in her grave wanting “warmth from the heart which sends it.” But the speaker of “The Worst of It” can only note bitterly that “my heart feels ice while my words breathe flame” (l. 108), and in “Dīs Aliter Visum” the woman wonders why there was

No grasping at love, gaining a share
 O’ the sole spark from God’s life at strife
 With death . . . ?

[ll. 126–28]

Mrs. Lee’s perception that God may be immanent in human love is given new force in the speeches of Rabbi ben Ezra and St. John, for whom the image of the spark represents momentary visitations of divine presence. Rabbi ben Ezra sermonizes

A spark disturbs our clod;
 Nearer we hold of God
 Who gives, than of His tribes that take

[ll. 28–30]

And St. John uses the image in the dramatic context of his approaching death and his attempt to reinvigorate himself so that the truth, however tenuously revived in his speech, may be communicated yet one more time:

"A stick, once fire from end to end:
"Now, ashes save the tip that holds a spark!
"Yet, blow the spark, it runs back, spreads itself
"A little where the fire was: thus I urge
"The soul that served me, till it task once more
"What ashes of my brain have kept their shape,
"And these make effort on the last o' the flesh,
"Trying to taste again the truth of things."

[l. 105-12]

St. John also sees how, in the years after Christ's death,

"Already had begun the silent work
"Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,
"Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt."

[l. 319-21]

On the one hand, we cannot look on God directly; too much light blinds. But in our moments of human darkness, we require lights by which we may see and understand more clearly. This apparent paradox, resolvable on a deeper level, runs through *Dramatis Personae*. There are few who can confront the absolute blaze for more than a moment, as the setting of "A Death in the Desert" suggests and as "Deaf and Dumb" makes explicit in the image of the prism which transforms the "blankest white" into the hues, the "jewelled bow" of this life. Hence St. John's fable of the babe born in the grotto, who has had only a glimpse of the sun and is told that there is "more glow outside" than the gleams he catches. Pure transparency—Abt Vogler's extemporized palace with its "rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass," the "place in the other world . . . / All glass and gold, with God for its sun" envisioned by the speaker of "The Worst of It"—is not of this world. But we need St. John's optic glass which clarifies by putting objects at a distance, just as his Gospel, a product of human speech, throws a necessary veil over the Eternal even as it figures it forth. At the other end of the moral, poetic, and religious spectrum, Sludge serves as a window, "whether thin or thick, / Or stained or stainless," through which spirits look at us and we at them (ll. 324-25). He parodies Abt Vogler there, just as he is made to parody the idea of the "prism's obstruction" when he says of his paying audience:

They fancied I was made to lose,—smoked glass
Useful to spy the sun through, spare their eyes:
And had I proved a red-hot iron plate
They thought to pierce, and, for their pains, grew blind,
Whose were the fault but theirs?

[l. 634-38]

Sludge's argument is characteristically sophistical. It is true that one cannot look directly on the Eternal, but here protection becomes confused with deception.

Imagery thus supports the theme of a volume in which Browning, assaying his personal loss while simultaneously attempting to speak to his age, returns once and again to a familiar theme: that life is a probation, a progress in time which is measured against our fleeting apprehensions of divine truth and our experience of loss, separation, and death. St. John's impending death merely heightens his sense of the disproportion between the here and now and what is to follow; of those generations yet unborn, he wonders,

"Can they share
 "—They, who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength
 "About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,
 "Living and learning still as years assist
 "Which wear the thickness thin, and let man see—
 "With me who hardly am withheld at all,
 "But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,
 "Lie bear to the universal prick of light?"

[ll. 198–205]

The theme of time in *James Lee's Wife*, as we have already seen, is dramatized through a series of recognitions on the part of the wife. She first realizes how the world can figuratively change in a single day; she experiences shock at the end of her relationship with him; she becomes more aware of a distinction between transient and loyal relationships ("Whom Summer made friends of, let Winter estrange"). She comes to accept stoically the wind's message that "nothing endures" and derives from this a dim hope that this is "life's pact, / Perhaps probation . . ." There is also the imagined warning of Da Vinci:

"Shall earth and the cramped moment-space
 "Yield the heavenly crowning grace?
 "Now the parts and then the whole!"

ll. 320–22]

With this new-found realization that she has expected too much of the present, Mrs. Lee seeks permanence in memory and sets out resolutely to confront the ambiguous destiny of a life alone. By contrast, the young woman of "Gold Hair" seeks a delusory permanence in holding on to her wealth. In "The Worst of It," a "minute of trivial wrong" separates the lovers forever, while in "Dîs Aliter

Visum" the separation results, obversely, from a failure to establish a relationship at a crucial moment in the past. The male speaker of the first poem informs the woman that she "must bear, / Abide and grow fit for a better day" (ll. 74-75), but that this is simply an unknowing parroting of a recurrent theme is shown by his concluding announcement that unlike God, he will not forgive her. The failure of the man in "Dis Aliter Visum" is that he failed to make a "wise beginning, here and now," to taste the mingled sweetness and sadness of "earth's true food for men . . ." The time scheme of the poem—a moment now at a party, a memory of a moment ten years ago, and the abrupt dismissal of the ten years themselves—obliterates duration, minimizing a decade by its focus on the single moment of insight at either end. The intensity of the woman's bitter realization is communicated through the abruptness of her first words, in which she seizes the opportunity left open by what was apparently a chance remark: "Stop, let me have the truth of that!" And her last words summarize the failure of all of them to use their time well:

For Stephanie sprained last night her wrist,
Ankle or something. "Pooh," cry you?
At any rate she danced, all say,
Vilely; her vogue has had its day.
Here comes my husband from his whist.

[ll. 146-50]

And in "Too Late," the passage of six years is treated with equal casualness; the man's despair derives allegedly from the fact that death has interrupted the potentially healing and mutually illuminating processes of time, but his claim that he would have been open to her had she only spoken or given him a look is rendered suspect by his dwelling on futile regrets and his fatalistic sense that his life is ended, his soul sentenced.

In the foregoing poems on the private life, love in its true form is a means by which the eternal informs and transfigures the finite and momentary. The theme of time is given more than private significance in "Abt Vogler," "Rabbi ben Ezra," and "A Death in the Desert," all of which speculate on the divine plan itself.

For Abt Vogler, music not only partakes of time but, in its dependence upon it, is paradoxically closer to the infinite than any other art form.² Music does not, in a certain sense, exist outside its own performance; it is the temporal expression of

sounds which are set down in writing for posterity but realized only in the act of performance. Extemporization is an even more extreme case, for there the music is not set down in writing and is hence unique, never to be exactly duplicated. We have seen how distance and time are obliterated in Abt Vogler's comparison of his music to a palace of gold which reaches up to heaven as heaven reaches down to earth, with "novel splendors" which neither "pale nor pine." The palace of music becomes a haven both for the dead returned to life and the as-yet unborn: "What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon; / And what is,—shall I say, matched both?" (V). The only sense in which the music itself is permanent is as one improvisation on an eternal theme, that of the "same, same self, same love, same God." Since "eternity affirms the conception of an hour," the music will not really be lost, although this particular note in a human life will never recur. Abt Vogler's realization is incomplete, for reasons I have tried to outline above. But his speech, with its confidence that not all that is lost is lost forever, marks a step away from the disillusionment of the initial poems dealing with the private life.

"Abt Vogler" offers a development, in aesthetic terms, of the idea that permanence can be sought in impermanence itself. "Rabbi ben Ezra" reexamines the idea in moral terms; the evolution of a human soul becomes a kind of analogue to Abt Vogler's extemporization. Like Abt Vogler, the rabbi asserts that nothing is ever really lost, for the assaying of our accomplishments at the end of our life must take into account those intangible and uncertain purposes, those fancies and immature instincts, never realized in words. Rabbi ben Ezra thus answers the imagined hedonist, who is preaching a *carpe diem* philosophy, by placing time in its proper perspective:

Fool! All that is, at all,
 Lasts ever, past recall;
 Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
 What entered into thee,
That was, is, and shall be;
 Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

[ll. 157-62]

To the words of these two speakers, composer and rabbi, the reported speech of St. John contributes a fuller spiritual insight; thus the poems form a kind of aesthetic, moral, and religious triad. The fact that, as I have pointed out above, St. John's speech is

recorded and not presented to us directly or, as it were, onstage, confirms from an unexpected angle the truth of Abt Vogler's observations. Unrehearsed speech is a kind of extemporization, and the exact words of St. John cannot be recreated any more accurately in Pamphylax's document than Abt Vogler's music can be recorded after the fact by himself. We have to put our faith in the general report, not the precise "notes." St. John himself argues that the details of what he records are less important than the implementation of the truth of the Gospel story in our own actions: "Leave knowledge and revert to how it sprung? / Thou hast it; use it and forthwith, or die!" (ll. 480-81). St. John also echoes Rabbi ben Ezra's view when he says, "Is it for nothing we grow old and weak, / We whom God loves? When pain ends, gain ends too!" (ll. 206-7). Unlike the rabbi's sermon, however, in which death is portrayed as a completion, St. John's dying speech describes death as an entrance into a new life in which history gives way to a timeless present:

"To me, that story—ay, that Life and Death
"Of which I wrote 'it was'—to me, it is;
"—Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.
"Is not God now i' the world His power first made?"

[ll. 208-11]

And yet we build on the past, "since all things suffer change save God the Truth. / Man apprehends Him newly at each stage . . ." (ll. 431-32).

By contrast with these three speakers, Caliban perceives a world in which hierarchies are frozen; time is indeed at a stop, but only in the speaker's belief that evil is all-pervasive, his conception of nature as a perpetually recurring sequence of cruelties for which death provides a happy oblivion rather than a release into new life. Setebos's half-human malignity provides the closest thing to a divine intrusion into the torture-chamber of arrested time which is Caliban's world; the storm at the end "teaches" Caliban, or so he believes, that he was a "fool to gibe at Him!" And Mr. Sludge, far more wittily, parodies through his description of the medium's art the conception Browning held of poetry as embodying the infinite in the moment:

. . . Suppose I can, and will, and do
Look, microscopically as is right,
Into each hour with its infinitude
Of influences at work to profit Sludge?

[ll. 957-60]

Sludge, as we have seen, capitalizes on modern creeds; he uses imagery drawn from science, and he accepts a kind of comic version of evolution: the dead are those with "added prowess" who "do what we do, but noblier done" (ll. 826–31).³ But as we have already seen, he has not absorbed St. John's doctrine of the uses of the past and markets his own pseudo-miracles under the guise of science:

'Tis settled, we've some way of intercourse
Just as in Saul's time; only, different:
How, when and where, precisely,—find it out!

[ll. 857–59]

Thus Sludge, like Caliban, fails ultimately to comprehend the role that change plays, not only in human life but in history; he is doomed to repeat his sterile tricks as long as he can find gulls for his trade and to excuse them by the same dishonest rhetoric. Throughout *Dramatis Personae*, then, time is a kind of moral touchstone against which we measure the perception of the speaker, for life is a probation in a world of flux.

Imagery and theme in *Dramatis Personae* are in their turn supported and reinforced by the structure of the volume as a whole. I have pointed out how the five opening poems which focus on the private life are followed by four in which the speaker hypothesizes the nature of the universe and its real or imagined creator. Mrs. Lee offers the widest vision of the first five speakers; in watching her developing insight we are provided with a kind of gauge for assessing the other four. In the poems on religious subjects, St. John's speech—despite the inadequacies of the speaker—is the most perceptive, the widest in scope; then our range of vision narrows sharply in Caliban's soliloquy, for his theology is in some respects an unconsciously ironic inversion of St. John's. In the following five poems, two of which were added in 1868, the theme of death as the ultimate separation is prominent: "Confessions," "May and Death," "Deaf and Dumb," "Prospice," and "Eurydice to Orpheus." In the central poem of this group, "Deaf and Dumb," Browning, speaking in his own voice, enunciates his conception both of the role of the poet and a divine economy in which suffering and death have their allotted role. The companion-piece "Eurydice to Orpheus," added like "Deaf and Dumb" in 1868, by contrast stresses the frustration of one unable even to look; as deafness and dumbness force love to a new expression in brow, cheek, and eyes, the speaker in the companion-piece urges, "But

give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow! / Let them once more absorb me!" Thus the two poems added in 1868 offer both hope and despair in a way that defines more sharply the opposite poles of the volume as a whole.

Following "Eurydice to Orpheus," Browning examines the relationship of art to life through three speakers who are reflecting on their own lives. The theme that is announced in the opening line of "Youth and Art"—"It once might have been, once only"—is the old theme with a slightly different variation, and "A Face" and "A Likeness," despite their surface dissimilarities, turn on much the same point. Next, "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'" resumes structurally the major themes of the volume: the role of time in human affairs, and loss and gain as these operate through human relationships, works of art, and our relation with God. For Sludge sees himself both as a harlequin-artist and as poet-priest, a creator and intermediary between the world of the dead and ourselves. As the most elaborately conceived monologue of the volume, his speech promises that the balance of loss can be redressed; his customers will gain contact with what they believe they have lost, and of course in exchange will contribute to his own pecuniary gain. The length of the poem, which has disturbed some critics, is necessitated not only by the comic mixture of subtleties, sleight-of-hand tricks, and windy apologia that are all part of Sludge's rhetoric of self-defense, but also by its importance as the dramatic high-point of the volume.

In sum, then, I would argue that we can look at *James Lee's Wife* and "A Death in the Desert" each as central points within their own group of poems, at "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'" as a summing up and a parody of the preceding speakers, and "Deaf and Dumb" as the central statement of the volume, one in which Browning defines his own theme and method and which is indeed placed close to the actual center of *Dramatis Personae*. What remains to be accounted for is the role played in the volume by "Apparent Failure" and the "Epilogue." My own view is that these are inseparable companion-pieces, two halves of a single coda, for between them they define the vacillation between hope and despair which is both a thematic and a structural principle in the volume as a whole. In the first poem, "apparent failure" is converted to "real success," while the "Epilogue" provides a philosophical underpinning for a conclusion which, left to stand by itself and the end of the preceding poem, might have seemed too facile.

“Apparent Failure” argues from an extreme case, for the question of whether or not there is a purpose in human life is posed perhaps most dramatically, as Camus realized, by the fact of suicide. To the Christian, of course, suicide removes from God’s hands a decision which only He should make, and thus questions the efficacy, indeed the very reality, of His plan. In a certain sense, “Apparent Failure” and “Gold Hair” are companion-pieces, by virtue of their theme and their placement respectively as the penultimate and the second poems in the volume. The “angel” of Pornic with her gold hair cannot, in death, perpetuate the subterfuges of her life; and though her parents may lament her loss, the rediscovery of her skull is happily the parish’s gain. But whereas “Gold Hair” calls our attention to the “Corruption of Man’s Heart,” humankind’s infinite propensity to sin, “Apparent Failure” concludes with the hope that

a sun will pierce
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
 That, after Last, returns the First,
 Though a wide compass round be fetched;
 That what began best, can’t end worst,
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

[Stanza VII]

The speaker imagines the corpses that he sees to be those of an ambitious boy, a socialist, and a lustful man. Perhaps significantly, he views the bodies through “a screen of glass” which gives him the emotional distance he needs, yet may also symbolize the clarification of his perspective, his newly found recognition that no good is ever finally lost. Hence his sense of reverence in their presence, deriving from his recognition that whatever their failings, they all had their visions, all abjured the “wiser,” “safer,” “fitter” way. Death has levelled them, yet as Browning’s Pippa had recognized there is still no last nor first; and the perspective acquired by the end of the poem suggests a kind of elevated dignity in these men which curiously diminishes the solemnities of the statesmen (cited in the first stanza) who are shaping the course of public events. Superficially, Browning seems to be recalling here the argument of the witty Florentine moralizer of “The Statue and the Bust” who argues that the paralysis of the will is a moral deficiency in itself, quite aside from the ends, good or bad, which the will serves. But “Apparent Failure,” posing the question of “sin” far more directly and with more finality, moves toward a confirmation not so much

of Abt Vogler's facile optimism that "the evil is null, is nought, / Is silence implying sound" but of his understanding that "there shall never be one lost good!"

The distance which Browning had come since 1855 can be measured by comparing the two poems which conclude *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personae* respectively. Whereas "One Word More" had shown the poet seeking refuge in the privacy of his love, the "Epilogue" conveys the sober, difficult hope of the sufferer driven by a need to speak publicly. If Browning, through whatever dramatic guise, speaks at any time of his wife in *Dramatis Personae*, it may be in "Prospice," where the speaker anticipates a reunion with the "Soul of souls." This apotheosis of the human is matched, in the "Epilogue," by the humanization of the divine, for there Christ, whose very humanity symbolizes the triumph of personality, is the Face of faces. As Abt Vogler had described how "the tremulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth, / As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky" (IV), so the "Epilogue" describes "how heaven's high with earth's low should intertwine" (l. 67).

Browning's procedure in the first two parts of the "Epilogue" resembles the procedure of the volume as a whole. For this reason, it is unwise simply to throw out of court the cases made by the first two speakers. Whether or not, as Watson Kirkconnell first argued, the "Levites" represent the ritualists of Rome and the Oxford movement,⁴ the religious ceremony described by the First Speaker is one mode of apprehending the divine, as Browning had recognized in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*. But it is simply not, from his point of view, the best mode. In spirit, the First Speaker, "as David," resembles Rabbi ben Ezra, with his triumphant, joyous assertion of God's presence, and we simply cannot put aside the David of Browning's earlier "Saul." Nor can we ignore the thousands who become "as a single man" in "look, gesture, thought and word," for their experience has a kind of validity in a collection of poems which repeatedly ask questions about a reality behind a world of appearances. But what is missing in this speaker's words is a recognition which *Dramatis Personae* as a whole sustains, namely that of the uniqueness of each individual. To become "as a single man" with many others is in some measure to sacrifice individual clarity of perception. Thus it is perhaps significant that the concluding image is that of the Lord appearing "in the glory of His cloud." On one level, that image reminds us that we cannot

confront His glory with the naked eye, but on another it implies a clouding of vision which prevents the speaker from grasping alternative possibilities. "Heaven's high" here dominates all else and is invoked with too great a facility.

If "Abt Vogler" and "Rabbi ben Ezra" come to mind in the words of the First Speaker, those of the Second, "as Renan," recall St. John's anticipation of the skeptics in "A Death in the Desert." We move, that is, from too confident an assertion of gain to an overly despairing consciousness of loss, an inertia of the soul which, no longer seeing the "real" Face in its "visible place," concludes it has lost all. Light dies out; "grave music and mild fire" are succeeded by silence and darkness. The agony of exile is dramatized by the disappearance of the pure light:

We, lone and left
 Silent through centuries, ever and anon
 Venture to probe again the vault bereft
 Of all now save the lesser lights, a mist
 Of multitudinous points, yet suns, men say—
 And this leaps ruby, this lurks amethyst,
 But where may hide what came and loved our clay?

[ll. 43-49]

This fatalistic vision results from staking everything on empirical evidence. For the thoroughgoing empiricist, the loss cannot be redressed, the "multitudinous points" cannot imply a pure light, or even separate suns. The Second Speaker's underlying fear is that the reality of the Face has depended wholly on the ability of men to re-create it in worship, and by implication he is responding to the First Speaker when he asks:

Could man indeed avail, mere praise of his,
 To help by rapture God's own rapture too,
 Thrill with a heart's red tinge that pure pale bliss?

[ll. 31-33]

If "earth's low" is that which defines our vision of possibilities, then divine benignity has indeed retreated from the world.

The Second Speaker thus tempers the unguarded optimism of the First and, to that degree, offers a corrective. For we must indeed submit our private visions to history, even at the risk of losing what originally invested them. But the outcome of that submission need not be loss. The Third Speaker is unidentified but, I think, comes closer to speaking for Browning than any other character in the volume. This speaker's opening statement, "Friends,

I have seen through your eyes; now use mine," performs a function like that of the words in "One Word More," "Let me speak this once in my true person." Whether the "friends" are merely the two preceding speakers or all the characters of *Dramatis Personae*, the mode of address is important, for the Third Speaker is intent on providing a view which builds on, but finally transcends, those of the first two. He begins by defending the integrity of individual human beings. The human personality is like a rock in the Arctic seas around which the waves swarm and over which they pass, to center again around another. The effect of the metaphor is sharpened if we compare it with Arnold's "mortal millions" who live solitary "in the sea of life enisled." For Arnold's quiet melancholy, Browning substitutes a sense of personal integrity amidst change and flux, even while acknowledging that isolation and death are abiding human realities. It is easy to read the resolute ending carelessly and to miss the insistence not only on humanity's endurance but also its helplessness. We have in a way come full circle in the volume, for like Mrs. Lee, the Third Speaker acknowledges that the world is not made for him and yet, paradoxically, must be accepted as a testing ground. In his description, the waves "mock" the "mimic monarch" rock, the human being who only appears to be the center of the universe,

With radiance caught for the occasion,—hues
Of blackest hell now, now such reds and blues
As only heaven could fitly interfuse

[l. 78-80]

Mrs. Lee's description of the blue of the cricket on the turf, the red fans of the butterfly, has been echoed here to suggest the whirl of good and evil which shapes our lives; and indeed the shifting colors, borrowings from reality "caught for the occasion," seem emblematic of the many different apprehensions of the truth which *Dramatis Personae* as a whole provides. We are obligated, finally, to seek ways of converting to our gain the knowledge that

one world could do
All the diverse work, old yet ever new,
Divide us, each from other, me from you. . . .

[l. 93-95]

Unlike Arnold, Browning was able to reconstitute his poetic faith, and the fullest statements of his artistic and religious creed

in *The Ring and the Book*, *La Saisiaz*, and the *Parleyings*, were yet to come. As the aging Poet Laureate was to hope that he would see not only a long-departed friend but his Pilot "face to face," so does the Third Speaker seek consolation in his own "Faith beyond the forms of faith" in "that one Face," a visage which combines the sense of Christ's presence and the memory of his physical loss in a "universe that feels and knows." The words blend the physical with the spiritual, feeling with a knowledge that transcends reason. The Face which "decomposes" only to "recompose" comes to represent both the continually active powers of the poet's art, creating, dissolving, and re-creating a universe at will, and a Christ whose reality for us is that, while not merely the projection of human imagination as the Second Speaker implies, He can be actualized in different ways and at different times by different human beings.⁵ Through the prismatic vision of the workings of Providence that informs *Dramatis Personae*, Browning sought and in some measure achieved a moving integration of his private loss as a husband and his public obligations as a mid-Victorian artist.

Notes

Preface

1. To recount the critical history in detail would be tedious and unrewarding. The traditional tone is neatly captured in a remark in the formerly standard biography to the effect that "in some of the poems, notably in 'Abt Vogler,' 'Rabbi ben Ezra,' 'Prospice,' and the 'Epilogue,' the poet's spiritual fervor touches its high-water mark" (W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, *The Life of Robert Browning* [London: Methuen, 1910], p. 234). Similarly, William Clyde DeVane declares "Rabbi ben Ezra" to be "chiefly valuable as an expression of Browning's own faith" (*A Browning Handbook* [2nd edition, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955], p. 294). On that particular poem, however, two recent editors have been more cautious, observing, "To say that the poet identifies himself completely with the medieval rabbi would be unwarranted, and critics have been incautious in defining this poem as a statement of Browning's philosophy" (Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds., *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* [2nd edition, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968], p. 282, n. 1). "A Death in the Desert" has recently undergone a similar examination by Elinor Shaffer in a study to which my indebtedness is apparent in Chapter 2 below, "Browning's St. John: The Casuistry of the Higher Criticism," *Victorian Studies*, 16 (1972), 205-21. The more general reader of Browning should look at Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in the Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957, and W. W. Norton, 1963) and William Cadbury, "Lyric and Anti-Lyric Forms: A Method for Judging Browning," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 34 (1964), 49-67, for sophisticated approaches to the general problem. Again using some poems from *Dramatis Personae* as instances, Langbaum sees "Rabbi ben Ezra" as "a dramatic monologue by virtue of its title only; otherwise it is a direct statement of a philosophical idea, because there is no characterization or setting . . ." In "Abt Vogler," by contrast, the statement "is conditioned by the speaker's ecstasy as he extemporizes on the organ. His sublime vision of his music as annihilating the distinction between heaven and earth has validity as part of the ecstatic experience of extemporizing, but becomes a matter of philosophical conjecture as the ecstasy subsides and the music modulates back into the 'C Major of this life . . .' [Thus] the tension between what is known through sympathy and what is only hypothesized through judgment generates the effect characteristic of the dramatic monologue" (pp. 105-6). Even this subtle distinction, however, tends to disappear if, with Roger Slakey, we view "Rabbi ben Ezra" as a sermon ("A Note on Browning's 'Rabbi ben Ezra,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 5 [1967], 291-94). A sermon does not require the same strategy as a monologue, but it does presuppose a speaker and an audience, as well as a rhetorical reinforcement of a particular, and hence partial, point of view. Cadbury, in the context of a discussion of "Love among the Ruins," remarks that "Apparent Failure" "gives us no reason to assume a dramatic narrator"

(pp. 64–65). It is always useful, however, to remember the title of the poem; the speaker here as, I think, in “Prospice,” may on one level “speak for” Browning without *being* Browning, or at least anything more than one aspect of him.

2. For a further development of my hypothesis regarding Browning’s growing awareness of the importance of the actual placement of individual poems, see “Browning Rearranges Browning” and the works by other critics cited therein, *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, II, i (1974), pp. 39–54.

3. Lines 482–87 in Volume IV of the Centenary Edition of the *Works*, ed. F. G. Kenyon (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1912), from which all further quotations are taken.

4. Sludge also uses the paired terms in reference to himself, lines 903–5.

I. Private Loss

1. C. H. Herford, *Robert Browning* (London: W. Blackwood, 1905), p. 154.

2. For a thorough but, I think, somewhat overstated treatment of the poem from this point of view, see Glenn Sandstrom, “‘James Lee’s Wife’—and Brownings,” *Victorian Poetry*, 4 (1966), 259–70.

3. Richard Curle, ed., *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in Their Letters* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1937), p. 109.

2. The Religious Vision: Aspiration

1. Less concisely, Browning expressed much the same thought in a letter to Isa Blagden written from Pornic the year after *Dramatis Personae* appeared: “I suppose that what you call ‘my fame within these four years’ comes from a little of this gossiping and going out, and showing myself to be alive . . . [In the late 1830’s and early 1840’s] I used to go out . . . and see far more of merely literary people, critics &c.—than I do now,—but what came of it? There were always a few people who had a certain opinion of my poems, but nobody cared to speak what he thought, or the things printed twenty five years ago would not have waited so long for a good word . . . As I began, so I shall end, taking my own course, pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing God” (Edward C. McAleer, ed., *Dearest Isa* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951], pp. 48–49).

2. Cf. Lionel Stevenson, *Darwin among the Poets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 164: “The whole volume of 1864 not only assails the science-inspired fatalism of *Empedocles on Etna* and Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat*, but also shows an antagonism—in part, perhaps, subconscious—toward the theory of evolution in its Darwinian form, as emphasizing man’s kinship with the lower orders of animal life.”

3. By the skeptic’s law of nature, Browning seems to imply something like Tennyson’s “hollow orb of moving Circumstance / Roll’d round by one fix’d law” (“The Palace of Art,” ll. 255–56); cf. Teufelsdröckh’s words in *Sartor Resartus* (II, viii): “What are the Laws of Nature? To me perhaps the rising of one from the dead were no violation of the Laws but a confirmation; were some far deeper Law, now first penetrated into, and by spiritual Force . . . brought to bear on us with its Material Force” (ed. C. F. Harrold [New York: Odyssey Press, 1937], p. 256).

3. The Religious Vision: Debasement

1. Thus the line in the MS, "And feels small eft-things course about his spine" becomes, "And feels about his spine soft eft-things course" (l. 5); the MS reading "yet mere playthings all the while, / He could admire and mock too" (ll. 64-65) becomes, "yet mere playthings all the while, / Things he admires and mocks too" (a revision which tightens the antecedent, increases the harsh, sibilant quality of the speech, and puts a deliberate strain on the meter); the MS reading "giving just respite lest it stop through pain, / Saving the last for worst" (ll. 254-55) becomes, "giving just respite lest we die through pain, / Saving last pain for worst"; the MS reading "or let the apples rot upon the tree" (l. 273) becomes, "let the toothsome apples rot on tree."

2. The excellent summing up of two critical points of view by C. R. Tracy in "Caliban upon Setebos," *Studies in Philology*, 35 (1938), 487-91, remains a *sine qua non* for the serious student of the poem. The debate has since been reopened by John Howard ("Caliban's Mind," *Victorian Poetry*, I [1963], 249-57), Laurence Perrine ("Browning's 'Caliban upon Setebos': A Reply," *Victorian Poetry*, 2 [1964], 124-27), and perhaps most convincingly, Michael Timko ("Browning upon Butler; or, Natural Theology in the English Isle," *Criticism*, 7 [1965], 141-50).

3. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, in *Works* 5 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904), 80-81.

4. The difference between the manuscript and the published version shows Browning's attempt to intensify the mood; in lines 227-28, 232, 269, 272, and 274-75 the third person form used in the MS has been replaced by the first. A standard approach (which does not involve reference to the manuscript) is E. K. Brown, "The First Person in 'Caliban upon Setebos,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 66 (1951), 392-95.

5.

... as he grows he gathers much,
And learns the use of "I" and "Me,"
And finds "I am not what I see,
And other than the things I touch."

[In Memoriam, XLV]

6. For excellent studies of the poem, see W. O. Raymond, "Browning's Casuists," in *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning* (2nd edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), especially pp. 141-47, and Isobel Armstrong, "Browning's 'Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 2 (1964), 1-9. The background of the poem has been so well discussed that it seems sufficient to refer here to the appropriate section in DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, pp. 307-12.

7. The revisions in the manuscript are sometimes in the direction of greater intimacy and colloquialism; for example, Browning changed "how many rare philosophers of old" to "how many of your rare philosophers" (l. 121) in the manuscript, and later revised "but as one tells a story" to "the knack of story-telling" (l. 192). Another change, again after the manuscript stage, substituted "fellowship" for "company" in the line "gulping David in good company" (l. 227), a revision which appears to stress the American bonhomie which Browning must, on occasion, have detested. For an interesting study of Sludge's speech see John V. Fleming, "Browning's Yankee Medium," *American Speech*, 39 (1964), 26-32.

8. It may be that because Browning was attacking the charlatanism of mediums and excoriating a theory by which his wife had been swayed, he shifted to the dramatic form as a way of redirecting and controlling the intense bitterness that otherwise might have sought an outlet as a personal statement. The bitterness is the more understandable because, given the poet's belief in the inviolacy of a shared relationship between two kindred spirits (cf. "Evelyn Hope" and "One Word More"), the spiritual pretensions of a medium might well have seemed to threaten him as a husband. One also recalls the angry lines written and soon regretted after he read Fitzgerald's posthumously published comments on Mrs. Browning's death. But these are not the manifestations of a morbid imagination or an insecure personality; Sludge is characterized as loathsome, but he is a successful dramatic creation rather than a disguise for the poet.

4. Imagery, Structure, and Theme: The Unity of "Dramatis Personae"

1. Cf. John xviii.3, in which Judas leads a band with lanterns and weapons to take Christ into custody.

2. For two modern studies of merit, see George M. Ridenour, "Browning's Music Poems: Fancy and Fact," *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 369-77, and Wendell Stacy Johnson, "Browning's Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 22 (1963), 203-7.

3. Again there is a hint of *In Memoriam* in Sludge's words; Tennyson there argues for

trust that those we call the dead
Are breathers of an ampler day
For ever nobler ends.

[*In Memoriam*, CXVIII]

4. Watson Kirkconnell, "The 'Epilogue' to *Dramatis Personae*," *Modern Language Notes*, 41 (1926), 213-19.

5. Cf. Roma A. King, "The Necessary Surmise: The Shaping Spirit of Robert Browning's Poetry," in W. Paul Elledge and Richard L. Hoffman, eds., *Romantic and Victorian: Studies in Memory of William H. Marshall* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), pp. 349-50.

Acknowledgments

I WISH TO EXPRESS my indebtedness to the University of Nebraska Research Council for both the time and the travel assistance which helped to make this study possible, to the staff of the University of Nebraska Library for providing the necessary working conditions, and to the staff of the Pierpont Morgan Library for allowing me to examine and quote from the original manuscript of *Dramatis Personae*. Professors Clyde de L. Ryals and Roma A. King, Jr. offered many helpful comments on an earlier draft, but, needless to say, bear no responsibility for the weaknesses that remain. The same exemption extends to Carol Poston, whose rigorous criticism has saved me from many blunders.