

**THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH':
THE RELATION OF PARTS TO THE WHOLE IN
*THE RING AND THE BOOK***

Yıldız KILIÇ*

Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), as a work dominated by the concept of truth, derives stature from the profundity of its ultimate implications. Each of its twelve books, amounting in total to 21.000 lines of blank verse, stand with absolute conviction as factual interpretations that are in reality no more than a collection of indulgent personal opinions. As a collective whole, these same accounts of implausible 'factuality' constitute an edifice that stands for the essentially illusive and ambiguous nature of Truth. Hence, from a presupposition of truth emerges the revelation of its non-existence, from which dawns the possibility of *a truth* – achievable only by means of an accumulative pluralistic over-view. The significance that truth is never achievable in the absolute, that at best it is knowable and then chiefly recognisable only by means of its contrast with falsehood, is a direct achievement of the poem's multi-part structure.

The poem is an Organicist¹ reaction specifically to that part of the Great Chain of Being that establishes man as a lesser entity to God and only just above animal and plant life. The higher up the hierarchical structure the greater the degree of autonomy and the greater the degree of integral purity and therefore truth: hence, while God and the realm of the Divine is divested with absolute independence and truth, humanity and the earthly realm, in relation to it, is dependent and false. The self-conscious subjectivism of Aestheticism in the late Nineteenth Century represents a culminative conclusion to Organicist development, so that humanity is no longer measured against the standard of Nature (imbued with the Divine) but exists by merit of its own measure: *Humanism* - the sanctity of human existence and the sublime enormity and idealism of the human mind and spirit – is a standard by which the individual is

* İ.Ü. Edebiyat Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı Araştırma Görevlisi. Dr.

¹ The philosophical and literary principle of employing nature emblemism to assert arbitrary social dogma, later evolving into a contrary but equally arbitrary assertion of autonomous individualism.

to be recognised as Organic personification of *earthly* ideal, a superior creation on par with the superior entity of God. To self-defined Nineteenth-Century individualism, then, sufficiently enwrapped within the ongoing argument of private / public identity, the abject dislocation that the Chain of Being instigates between man and the divine, which subsequently associates man with the bestial (as does Nineteenth-Century science under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution) is illustration of the ambiguity of the human condition at yet another conceptual junction: that man's parity to the Divine, indeed his parallel worth, is defined by his proximity to truth.

The story of a late Seventeenth-Century murder trial, entitled *Old Yellow Book*² provides the initial framework of historical information; the structure of the *when* and *what*, over which are draped the illusive factors of *how* and *why*,³ - the poem's ten "interpretations, versions and perversions."⁴ Consisting of twelve books, only ten are strictly dramatic monologues, while the remaining two, Books 1 and 12, are a prologue and epilogue in which Browning provides explanation and conclusion. The remaining books are directly concerned with the trial: hence, Books 2, 3 and 4 are the testimonies of individuals who are not directly involved, but represent varying strata of social opinion; Books 5, 6 and 7 are the statements of the three protagonists Guido, Caponsacchi and Pompilia; Books 8, 9 and 10 are the workings of legal and ecclesiastical machinery - ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous; finally Book 11 is

² The book was discovered by Browning in the market place in Florence in June 1860, following further investigation of the events, Browning began the *The Ring and the Book* in 1864. Briefly stated, Count Guido Franceschini, an impoverished nobleman seeks a lucrative marriage solely for financial advancement. He discovers the Comparini family, a relatively elderly couple of landowners with a single heir. The girl's mother Violante Comparini, charmed by the promise of noble rank gives Guido the hand of Pompilia, her 13 year old child in marriage. The child bride is delivered to her husband's poverty-stricken estate and unceremoniously abandoned. Pompilia leads a terrible life in the hands of her cruel husband and lecherous brother-in-law. Following appeals of help to various functionaries she is aided by a young canon, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, who escorts the now pregnant Pompilia to her parent's house. They are pursued by Guido who eventually catches up with Pompilia and sends her to a convent. While at her parents house awaiting to give birth the truth of her parentage becomes know, Violante confesses that unable to have a child she bought Pompilia as a baby from the slums of Rome. Guido is outraged when he hears of this and using the canon's name he enters the Comparini home along with four accomplices and murders the whole family; Pompilia dying of her wounds a little time later. Guido is arrested and tried, and in spite of an appeal to Pope Innocent XII, for special privileges as a cleric (he had received minor orders earlier in his life) he is eventually executed.

³ Donald S. Hair, *Browning's Experiments with Genre*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1972, p.118.

⁴ F.E. Halliday, *Robert Browning: Life and Work*, Jupiter Boks, London, 1975, p.146.

Guido's impassioned admonition just prior to his execution. While the "pure and crude fact"⁵ of a murder trial precipitates these books, it is the intellectual question they invoke that unites them as a single coherent statement.

Robert Browning considers *The Old Yellow Book* with scepticism⁶; having described it as a legal and factual document, he plays upon the assumptions of his reader that factuality is synonymous with truth. Immediately after which he promptly proceeds to cut down any such associations. Having read only the index of the book he adopts a pseudo-facetious stand and remarks:

Still read I on, from written title-page
 To written index, on, through street and street,

 I had mastered the contents, know the whole truth
 Gathered together, bound up in this book,⁷

Fact remains a singularly inadequate basis for the presumption of truth, since its *pure and crude* quality renders it a superficial rendition of events, bereft of emotional integrity. The question of personal integrity is strongly insisted upon, since a lack is often responsible for generating a purely egotistic interpretation, as seen in the accounts of the two defending councils. In Book 1 criteria of this nature is established for the judgement of following books; the reader being primed to consider truth as something illusive, seen partially at best, and a precious commodity for which to strive - certainly never to be assumed.

The question of preparing or priming the reader is an important way of relating the parts to the whole: since it creates continuity between the books by generating an active readerly response; links of comparison and re-evaluation are drawn between them as the reader consistently updates received definitions from the poet. The reader is allowed to see each character at the crises of realisation and with them, immediacy of impression free of detail from the imposition of author-decreed particulars allows for a slowly accumulative

⁵ Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, Penguin Books Ltd., London, (1868-9) 1990, p.48.

⁶ The symbolic association with the Bible – that other *old yellow book* – is further negated by the distrust of the institutionalistic precept of authority (implying both Chistian and paternal) implicated by 'the written word'.

⁷ Hair, *Browning's Experiments with Genre*, op. cit., p.118. (Source *Abt Vogler*).

knowledge of events derived through the process of recalling successive action: having to work at remembering, having to dismiss some as unnecessary, working to create a unified whole from the eclectic assortment of views brought before them. The motive within such a narrative construction is creating a sense of organic growth, plus a secondary and contributive, organic development of knowledge, extending from text to reader, plus intellectual and emotive reaction stemming from the reader and flowing back into the experience of illuminating the poem as an added dimension of interpretation. This is a world-view in the process of being made, and being made by 'perceivers'. A statement by John Colmer on the purpose of art seems particularly apt at this point; although he makes it in reference to Henry James, the point he makes can be applied equally to Browning:

The purpose of long-term art ...[is to] contain and *define the totality* in which they exist. In this way art becomes an aid to *increasing self-consciousness* instead of an immediate guide to direct action. *Literature itself is a form of action*. What we have in the novels of James and Ford Madox Ford that seek to render a small part of the world and make it *a microcosm of truth* is what David Caute calls '*action by disclosure - a contribution to a more reflective general consciousness*'.⁸

Organicism is the principle force behind the creation of a 'microcosm of truth', and the presentation of a fragmented 'totality'; when all the many parts of the organic entity are brought together, the poem emerges as a single 'living' entity.

The emergent definition of truth shows Browning irreconcilable to the concept of absolute truth as an earthly possibility; "On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round."⁹ The circle, representing ideal and perfect truth, is confined to the celestial; the arc, meanwhile, representative of the fragmentary, hence imperfect, is part of the earthly. It is not incidental that the overall structure of *The Ring and the Book* is circular; not as a progressive, ever heightening realisation of truth, but suitably for an earthly example, it is an accumulation of facts - both actual and false; from the constancy or inconsistency of which we deduce the truth. Concepts in the poem are considered in two different ways; in the ironic sense, when the reverse of what

⁸ John Colmer, *Coleridge to Catch 22: Images of Society*, Macmillan Pres Ltd., London, 1978, (My italics) p.4.

⁹ Hair, *Browning's Experiments with Genre*, op. cit., p.118.

is being stated is in fact being implied; and the actual sense, when what is said is taken as authentic. Ironic expression renders a very strongly manifest example of authorial manipulation. The aim being to invoke the opposite meaning of a commonly held belief: "The irony arises from Browning's consciousness of his audience ... his audience has a completely different idea of the term. The poet exploits these differences by seeming to share these assumptions about truth and value, and yet at the same time enlightens his audience by presenting inconsistencies that force them to consider the real meaning of the terms."¹⁰ Taken to its extreme, irony becomes dangerously deconstructive: if fact can be placed in doubt, then poetry, already in a tenuous position as *make-believe*, runs the danger of becoming totally redundant. Faced with the dilemma, Browning is moved to question:

Or is the book at all,
And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
And the white lies it sounds like.¹¹

In answer Browning identifies himself as the active poetic presence:

Yes and no!
From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot truth, that memorable day,
Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold, -
Yes, but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which, mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.¹²

The *I* is recognised as a directional and structural force, an admission by Browning to the extent of his presence in the fabric of the poem; "I fused my live soul and that inert stuff."¹³ Perhaps it is due to this presence that *The Ring and the Book* is considered a disruption of the dramatic monologue form. In this context the authorial voice ought not be dismissed simply as a misdemeanour, as it implements an element of continuity in an otherwise isolated series of accounts. Aware of the unresolved ambiguity of the poetic presence, Browning further refines the concept, and in illuminating it he leads us back to his original concept of truth:

¹⁰ Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, op. cit., p.35, ln.458.

¹¹ Ibid. p.35, ln.457-464.

¹² Ibid. p.35, ln.469.

¹³ Ibid. p.41, ln.698-700.

Well, now; there's nothing in nor out o' the world
 Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
 What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?¹⁴

Having stated that Browning's definition of truth has associations with a removed, celestial vision, it takes little speculation to surmise that the indefinable something - given the ultimate accolade of being held equal to celestial truth - is the force of the creative mind: the only human endeavour that can out reach a little from the mire of earthly imperfection, by taking the fragmentary and making of it a coherent structure:

No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,
 May so project his surplusage of soul
 In search of body, so add self to self.¹⁵

The individual is externally defined by public identity and internally by private cerebral integrity - hence the notion of "self to self". While emphasis is upon an impossibility of ever achieving perfect truth, the idea is not without hope; man can create a truth, an ultimate good, but always by the manipulation of existing things, nevertheless, it is something for which he most strive and ultimately be set free by.

Art, then, is a pathway to perfect truth, one that will not end in perfection, but will mark a progression by being a unifier of fragments. Poetry is a way of utilising facts, fragments of earthly existence, a principled application engendered with creative powers, to reach a deeper more absolute truth. This is the reason behind the fragmentary structure of *The Ring and the Book* and the source of its unification, when its parts ultimately correspond to form a coherent organic whole.

Books 2, 3 and 4 constitute the first section of the poem where a significant technical pattern begins to emerge. As Browning has previewed in detail the arguments of each book in the prologue, it is by our changing views to the events, rather than a surprised confrontation with them, that this sense of accumulative development becomes clear.

The two monologues of Books 2 and 3 are at great variance from one another, each establishing contrary extremes. When 'Half-Rome' acclaim

¹⁴ Ibid. p.42, ln.723-725.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.69, ln.157.

Guido a gentleman of honour, 'Other Half-Rome' condemns him as lowly and evil, encouraging a one-to-one comparison and consequent determination and dismissal of obvious falsity. It is interesting that each narrator states categorically that *he* is presenting the truth, and indeed they seem to make it quite plausible. For example, 'Half-Rome' endeavouring to convince his listener often re-enforces what he has said by qualifying it with a validation of the truth - asking his audience whether they want the truth, as if it were a commodity at his private disposal: "(Will you have the truth?)"¹⁶ This unquestioning assurance is a trait common to those accounts where fact is most flagrantly over-ridden by tainted subjectivity: the more adamant the claim to truth, the greater the need to camouflage underlying falsity. By the use of ironic and authentic meaning, Browning is able to continue a dual dialogue with his reader: first, as the authentic voice of the characters, claiming truth; second, as the poet transcending the character's words by an undercurrent of irony, revealing innate falsity. Each of the books are able to stand as individual accounts of this trial - informative and complete within themselves; since without the full over-view we cannot establish what is or is not genuine. The more comprehensive our knowledge of the events, the more profound the realisation that truth is relative. Without this culminative view we take as wholly true the information divulged by Book 2, so that our initial contact with the events of the murder are of such blatant falsity as the impassioned account of Pompilia's flight from home:

She, some fine eve when lutes were in the air,
 Having put poison in the posset-cup,
 Laid hands on money, jewels and he like,
 And, to conceal the thing with more effect,
 By way of parting benediction too,
 Fired the house...¹⁷

The question of subjectivity is cleverly orchestrated at every junction of the poem: its chief importance lies in its role as a basis for comparative analysis.

For a man who is merely a part of the *curious masses*, 'Half-Rome' is fervently subjective in his presentation of the events. By his association with the crowds and his obvious pride at being acquainted with the latin term,

¹⁶ Ibid., p.65, ln.29.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.84, ln.711-716.

“Honoris causa”,¹⁸ using it to describe Guido’s attack upon Violante, we perceive that he is of the lower social order, yet he chooses to defend the aristocratic Guido, rather than Pompilia whom he has acknowledged to be of more humble origins. The extent of this bias becomes paramount when to justify his argument, he states with vicious prejudice that she set fire to her husband’s house with all inhabitants asleep within. The adamant protest that this is a fact “and not a charm of the devil, Sir,”¹⁹ is a poignant addition that resounds through out the edifice of the poem. It is not until the very end of Book 2, when with an air of warning to his companion whom we now acknowledge to be a younger man, when the narrator states: “About a house here, where I keep a wife,”²⁰ that the reason underlying his animosity towards impetuous young wives becomes all too clear.

Even in the face of clues as informative as these, the extent of bias does not register in the mind until we turn over the coin and examine the opposite side. To this, the disturbed account of a married man, who clearly feels threatened by Pompilia’s revolt against her husband, the account of Book 3 stands as a counter extreme. This type of counter balancing occurs between the books through out the poem. It is a way in which intellectual links are drawn through memory and interpretation to generate a constant updating of concepts like subjectivity and the self-revealing nature of prejudice. E.M. Forster isolates this concept as a technique, when he explains that the memory of the reader “will constantly rearrange and reconsider, seeing new clues, new chains of cause and effect, and the final sense (if the plot has been a fine one) will not be of clues or chains, but of something aesthetically compact...”²¹ The fact that this statement is so fully applicable to *The Ring and the Book* is rendered even more fascinating when one realises that it is derived from E.M Forster’s description of the ideal development of plot in the novel genre. The association between novel and poem is very close in the context of this work: since in the quest for truth, we achieve an in-depth character analysis of each speaker, relating each individual to the context of his social position.

The bias with which Book 3 is related is as detrimental to basic truths as the previous account; if a difference exists then it is one that promotes the premise that prejudice reveals more about the speaker than about his topic.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.65, ln.719.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.84, ln.719.

²⁰ Ibid. p.107, ln.1546.

²¹ E.M. Foster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Edward Arnold Ltd., London, 1963, p.84-85.

'Other Half-Rome' is a man of superior education and a higher class; while his manner of expression is more sophisticated - achieved by an ability to invoke a false sense of balanced representation; his outlook is very romantic and highly critical of Guido. Both these aspects of his account are evident in the quasi-balanced weighing of up of Guido and Pompilia; it is not surprising that this exercise rather overrides the original aim of neutrality and the balance becomes a calculated imbalance. Guido is dismissed as a rodent: "...over-burly for rat's hole / Suited to clerical slimeness."²² While Pompilia is hailed a lamb:

Pompilia, (thus become Count Guido's wife
Clandestinely, irrevocably his,)
Who all the while had borne, from first to last,
A brist a part i' the bargain, as yon lamb,
Brought forth from the basket and set out for sale.²³

Both narrators describe the scene of dramatic discovery, when Guido confronts Pompilia and Caponsacchi at the inn. We are able to observe, by focusing on just two incidents, the conflict of interpretation: the point of contention is determined as an unalterable fact by the author, making the play of two extreme views upon it an illuminating experience. Capponsacchi's disguise as a cavalier is interpreted by 'Half-Rome', supporter of Guido, as shameless defiance by "the bold abashless one"²⁴ with "wicked looking sword at side",²⁵ who had:

Doffed the priest, donned the perfect cavalier:
...
So, in the inn-yard, bold as 't were Troy-town,
There strutted Paris in correct costume.²⁶

The same disguise excites in 'Other Half-Rome', Pompilia's *advocate*, a vision of the priest as hero and defender of damsels. Guido, who had obviously thought his opponent would be a defenceless man of the cloth, when confronted by a *warrior* is terrified:

²² *The Ring and the Book*. p.122. ln.415-416.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.123, ln.459-64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.92, ln.1011.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.92, ln.1008.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.92, ln.1000-1006.

And alert, calm, resolute and formidable,
Not least the look of fear in that broad brow-

...

Yes, there stood he in secular costume
Complete from head to heel, with sword at side,

...

Guido, the valorous, had met his match,
Was forced to demand help instead of fight.²⁷

The same is true of Pompilia's action to disarm her husband. In Book 2 it is translated into an unfair attack upon Guido's person, when Pompilia:

Sprang to her husband's side, caught at the sword
That hung there useless, since they held each hand
O' the lover, had disarmed him properly,
And in a moment out flew the bright thing
Full in the face of Guido.²⁸

In Book 3 the same act of *attack* is considered the timely turning of the worm, Pompilia, much oppressed, is finally liberated in spirit:

[Pompilia] would have slain him on the spot
With his own weapon, but they seized her hands:
...
'At least and for ever I am mine and God's,
Thanks to his liberating angel death-
Never again degraded to be yours'.²⁹

The concept of truth is further refined into becoming a perpetually fluid notion, ready to transmogrify into truth or falsehood.

'Tertium Quid' (Book 4), unlike the previous accounts, sets out to be a balanced presentation, holding no emotional affinities with either party. It is distanced from the fray by virtue of being rendered with the flippant worldliness of a courtier informing, while aiming to amuse two royal personages. The use of *symmetrical* in: "Though she's not dead yet, she's as good as stretched / Symmetrical beside the other two",³⁰ seems an oddly mechanical term to use in the context of death, a word that sits uncomfortably

²⁷ Ibid. p.145, ln.1255-68.

²⁸ Ibid. p.93, ln.1031-35.

²⁹ Ibid, p.146, ln.1290-97.

³⁰ Ibid. p.159, ln.2-3.

in an otherwise conversational manner: but it does reflect the predetermined, calculated purpose of the account. Balance is present in this book, arising not from a wish to maintain objectivity for its own sake, but for the personal and highly practical aim of advancement for “teaching the two idiots”,³¹ presumably, in a manner most amusing. Balance, then, is an affectation that forms a distinct pattern, but one that is morally unsound. It is a balance that is motivated by a disassociation from the events and the protagonists; there is no bias because there is only cold indifference. Rendered with a detached, worldly cynicism, the narrator disassociates himself even further by placing between himself and the common vulgarity of the event, barriers of learned reference, removed examples from history and religion - a technique shared by other quasi-intellectuals in the poem. Pompilia being equated with Eve, for example, is an allegorical image commonly referred to: “‘The serpent tempted me and I did eat./ Her daughters ever since prefer to urge / Adam so starved me I was fain accept.’”³² The resulting *balance* is an equal damning of both parties: “‘Which of the two have sinned most? A nice point. / Which brownness is least black, - decide who can.’”³³ This is not a balanced argument because it fails from the onset to be objective; since objectivity is not simply a denial of those qualities that make one an individual - what could be deemed the *integral self*; but the ability to maintain a logical, yet sensitive mastery over all of one’s faculties. Of the accounts so far examined, perhaps this is least authentic, because it fails to be truthful even to itself. The narrative is motivated by an external source, one that presumes prejudices and values of a certain social order; to gain the favour of his audience the narrator adopts and re-affirms its values. The bitterly cynical aside: “‘...all this talk, talked, / ‘T was not for nothing that we talked, I hope?’”³⁴ so dismissive of his own arguments and justifications, goes some way to justify this idea of prejudice by design. It also explains why a clearly intelligent and educated individual should reduce as depraved an action as murder to the facile complaint that both parties have merely exchanged contracts - one for financial gain, the other for social elevation:

³¹ Ibid. p.203, ln.1640.

³² Ibid. p.182, ln.854-59.

³³ Ibid. p.176, ln.629-30.

³⁴ Ibid. p.203, ln.1635-36.

'I Guido truck my name and rank
 For so much money and youth and female charms.'-
 'We Pietro and Violante give our child
 And wealth to you for a rise i' the world thereby.'³⁵

Therefore that neither side had reason for complaint: implying by emphasis upon this point rather than the brutal deed itself, that actual immorality arose when both parties transgressed what should be a legal and binding contract - for failing, in fact, to *play the game*. While not contesting that being a courtier, the narrator, by necessity of his station, would not exhibit a scathing belittlement of the middle-class ethos, and the self-righteous pomposity of a man above the common crowd; it has to be supposed, nevertheless, that the underlying bias he is insinuating is his own. Browning has not declared his third narrator a courtier without reason; the mutability and 'man for all seasons' mentality is one that is being exploited here: firstly, to show that disruption can be generated from an external, as well as internal source; secondly, that truth must be derived from an act of *construction*, rather than wilful deconstruction: while the other accounts fabricate details in order to construct what *they* believe is a realistic picture, this account reduces everything - Guido's complex power-play is reduced to money grabbing, and Pompilia's tragic quest for freedom and love is reduced to the dalliance of a bored wife. The narrator's dully cynical end to the argument seems an ironic statement that also voices the condemnation of the poet: "You see the *reductio ad absurdum*, Sirs?"³⁶

The journalistic directness of the previous account provides a minimal control by which the earlier monologues are revealed to be false and Guido's account can be evaluated. Guido's defence in Book 5 is an intensification of issues raised in preceding monologues, issues with which we are now familiar; the pluralistic view is now enriched by the presentation of an individualistic account. A process of self-appraisal, which rendered with deep irony becomes not a defence, but ultimately the most harsh condemnation of Guido in the poem. The account is marked by an assured aura of calm:

³⁵ Ibid. p.173, ln.515-18.

³⁶ Ibid. p.203, ln.1631.

....why, 't is wine,
 Velletri,- and not vinegar and gall,
 So changed and so good the time grows! Thanks, kind Sir!
 Oh, but one sip's enough! I want my head
 To save my neck, there's work awaits me still.³⁷

Guido's confident speech reveals quite unintentionally a very dark side of hatred, bitterness and anger, an indigenous rage deep within him that only occasionally undermines the studied surface veneer. These untimely expositions are not because of any weakness in Guido's argument, which is often very clever and finely structured, for example, the shock admission of murder:

I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;
 Killed too the Comparini, husband, wife,
 Who called themselves, by a notorious lie,
 Her father and her mother to ruin me.³⁸

It ends upon a climactic, "Now for truth!"³⁹ implying with outrageous confidence that the admission of murder can be justified by his continued account. The act of murder is counter-balanced by an impressive lineage and the need to maintain an age old position of honour. The implications of Guido's values become more severe as his account progresses: the demand, "I was poor who should be rich,"⁴⁰ is one, which becomes even more unreasonable when made upon an individual, namely Pompilia. While demands upon women in marriage are not startling, the extreme to which this demand is taken is quite offensive. At this junction irony becomes operative again, so that when Guido states: "Before we had cohabited a month / She found I was a devil and no man"⁴¹ the authorial voice amid the irony, is harsher than we have known it at any other point. With admirable economy the exposition of Guido's inner world is depicted; he continues his reference to Pompilia:

³⁷ Ibid. p.207, ln.14-18.

³⁸ Ibid. p.210, ln.104-112.

³⁹ Ibid. p.210, ln.120.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.211, ln.168.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.223, ln.612-13.

Pompilia was no pidgeon, Venus's pet,
 That shuffled from between her pressing paps
 To sit on my rough shoulder, - but a hawk,
 I bought at a hawk's price and carried home
 To do hawk's service-⁴²

In a statement that transcends mere chauvinism to become quite sinister, when Pompilia is deemed, in the most nonchalant manner, a working animal as opposed to a pet; she is reduced to bestial ignorance, and worse still to the status of an inanimate object, a commodity bought and paid for. This view of Guido's has little to do with the question of wifely duty, and an awful lot to do with disturbed values. Thus Guido is made to damn himself, Browning's ironic presence making itself known with a horribly black humour. Having caught Pompilia speaking with the Priest, Guido demonstrates his humanitarian self-control, stating how he could: "With the vulgarest household implement, / Calmly and quietly cut off, clean thro' bone, / But one joint of one finger of my wife."⁴³ Of course he does not, but with seeming gentleness of manner and civilised decorum he makes do with simply menaces her with his sword:

I took the other however, tried the fool's,
 The lighter remedy, brandished rapier dread
 With cork-ball at the tip, boxed Malchus' ear
 Instead of severing the cartilage,
 Called her a terrible nickname, and the like
 And there an end: and what was the end of that?
 What was the good effect of the gentle course?⁴⁴

This account, abounding with irony and counter irony, establishes yet another veil of ambiguity over the concept of truth. Endeavouring to defend himself, the narrator (Guido) proves himself guilty, just as in the following two narratives (those of Capponsachi and Pompilia) the lack of defence proves them innocent. Subjectivity reveals the integral biases and character of the speaker; equally it reveals innate good.

The point of differentiation between Books 6 and 7, and other accounts is that the narrators, in this case, do not try to defend themselves. At no point does Caponsacchi try to defend himself, or try to justify his actions; he freely

⁴² Ibid. p.225, ln.701-705.

⁴³ Ibid. p.232, ln.952-55.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.233, ln.980-86.

states that it was he who prompted the decision to escape: "Now follow me as if I were fate! / Leave this house in the dark tomorrow night."⁴⁵; his susceptibility to her beauty is retold without fear of being misunderstood. His aim is entirely to protect Pompilia:

Sirs, give what credit to the lie you can!
For me, no word in my defence I speak,
And God shall argue for the lady!⁴⁶

Even his animosity toward Guido is limited, for example, he does not advocate his death. After the passionate ravings of Guido himself, this is the voice and manner of a man who calls, not for his rights, or for vengeance, but for rationality; his tone is sensitive and heartfelt, while from his openness exudes dignity. To say that one intuitively feels, or rather is made to feel, that he is sincere and his words are true, may invite a cynical response, however, if we accept that through irony character is revealed, then we must realise that similar exposition occurs with still more subtle motions of authorial manipulation; this time in the promotion of innocence. As seen in Caponsacchi's gentle naivety and literal truth:

I never touched her with my finger-tip
Except to carry her to the couch, that eve,
Against my heart, beneath my head, bowed low,
As we priests carry the paten.⁴⁷

Though they are modest, the poet's prompts are not invisible: addressing the judges Caponsacchi states: "Why, there's a judge weeping! Did not I say / You were good and true at bottom? You see the truth-"⁴⁸ If the cantankerous pillars of law are seen to be moved, then we are meant to take note of it.

The same gentle force passes through Pompilia's account. She too is depicted an innocent, and ready to forgive Guido; in an account void of self-defence, passion enters as the tragic voice of despair, when she recalls begging to a Friar for help:

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.294, ln.1074-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.311, ln.1704-6.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.309, ln.1617-20.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.316, ln.1885-86.

The frightfulness of my despair in God:
 And, feeling, through the grate, his horror shake,
 Implored him, 'Write for me who cannot write,
 Apprise my parents, make them rescue me!⁴⁹

It must be remembered that we have received, so far, five different assertions as to Guido's cruel conduct towards Pompilia, within accounts that have often proven to be false on nearly all points except this one. Hence, prior to reaching Pompilia's account we have been made sure of her innocence on this very important count and know that she is justified. In an unprecedented move Browning disregards the evidence of Pompilia's literacy, as depicted in the *Old Yellow Book*, and claims she is illiterate; and is then able, in one fell swoop, to show Pompilia's vulnerability and prove true Caponsacchi's statement that the letters he received had been forged by Guido.

Earlier when Books 2 and 3 were compared, the falsity of each was clearly revealed. Since both the accounts just examined are true beyond doubt, when placed in a position of comparison, we find that their shared truths are revealed by virtue of near identical compatibility. The meeting of Pompilia and Caponsacchi at the theatre is such an example; first Caponsacchi:

...'Nay, I'll make her give you back your gaze'-
 Said Canon Conti; and at that word he tossed
 A paper-twist of comfits in her lap,
 ...
 ...Then she turned,
 Looked our way, smiled the beautiful sad strange smile.⁵⁰

And Pompilia's account of the same incident:

Sudden I saw him; into my lap there fell
 A foolish twist of comfits, broke my dream
 And brought me from the air and laid me low,
 ...
 ...There the comfit lay:
 I looked to see who flung them, and I faced,
 This Caponsacchi, looking up in turn
 Ere I could reason out why, I felt sure,
 Whoever flung them, his was not the hand.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.360, ln.1285-88.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.276, ln.407-12.

By commonly held values Books 6 and 7 mark a core of authenticity deep in the poem's heart; a point of climax which unable to heighten further, since it is an earth bound truth, begins subsequently to decline - forming, as it were, a ring, when the end turns downward to meet the beginning of the poem.

Books 8 and 9 constitute an important part of this decline in truth as personal integrity. The narrators - Archangelis and Bottinius, are council to Guido and Pompilia respectively. Their mutual aim seems to be to manipulate fact and make it a *particular*, as opposed to an *absolute* truth.

The monologue of Archangelis begins in a highly theatrical manner; as an experienced showman setting up stage: "Carnival-time - another providence! / The town a-swarm with strangers to amuse."⁵² In such professional hands truth becomes something mutable and easily manipulated. His arguments seem dangerously reasonable, 'devilish' in their logic, but the associations he conjures and the conclusions he invariably reaches are absurd. The uneasy question of Violante's brutally hacked face is reasoned with disturbingly calm logic:

Surgery would have just excised a wart;
The patient made such pother, struggled so
That the sharp instrument sliced nose and all.⁵³

If the patient will insistently thrash about, then even the removal of a wart will of course have a bloody ending. The notion of equating an uncooperative patient with an uncooperative murder victim is so outlandish, that one suspects would be very funny, if the underlying implications were not so sinister. "Fancy" clearly does not belong in the legal domain; *creative law* is hardly "...the patent truth-extracting process"⁵⁴ that Browning ironically suggests.

Book 9 is equally humourous, and if possible its sense of irony is that much darker. In Bottinius's argument the notion of comprehensive truth and legal representation (supposedly based on truth) is seen to be quite incompatible, and certainly damaging. Though Bottinius is defending the innocent party there is, absurdly contradictory as it may seem, no such thing as

⁵¹ Ibid, p.351, ln.974-83.

⁵² Ibid. p.386, ln.285-86.

⁵³ Ibid. p.419, ln.1489-91.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.57, ln.1279-81.

the whole truth and nothing but the truth in law. For example, he takes from Pompilia her strongest claim to innocence, the fact of her illiteracy. He states she is literate in order to prove that Guido had a sample of her handwriting, with which he successfully forged the letters to Caponsacchi. Thus rather than dispel ideas that she may have written those letters, he manages to firmly establish in the minds of the judges that which they would probably not have considered at all had he not mentioned it. Bottinius's idea is that the end justifies the means; it seems immaterial to him that an innocent person has been portrayed as guilty. He also fails to recognise that the means often proves so damning to his client that the end is rendered useless.

To this steady process of degeneration Book 10, the monologue of Pope Innocent, stands as a misplaced barrier. Only partially concerned with the trial, it is largely a philosophical soul-searching by its narrator, who re-evaluates his ability and right to voice judgement over others. Deviating from the norm of the poem, it is an intellectual analysis of personal integrity, rather than action. Browning obviously regards this account as his ideal vision of truth and one to be noted as such. Nevertheless, this brilliant indulgence by the poet is to intrusive a voice – a disruptive over-indulgence: it disregards all on-going techniques of motivation and continuity, so that the reader until now active in consolidating all isolated books into a single entity, is shut out. While the inclusion of this book is not a mistake, it seems a gross under estimation by the poet of the ability of his readership to realise the concept of truth without the imposition of so staunch and example of unquestionable authority. Irony may, when along side diverse opinion, be criticised for anarchic instability; the implications of truth merely by opposition to an existing belief, may be considered de-constructive, a too passive invocation of truth. Perhaps this is the reason behind the need to include Book 10; that by being a constructive presentation of truth, derived through the established system of religion, it will lend authority to Browning's values. Unfortunately it does not, since a negative precedent has been installed in Books 8 and 9; the legal system has been shown to be a liability to objectivity, so pliable is it to subjective interpretation. Since the fallibility of all individuals is a fundamental principle to the poem, the Pope too is implicated. The fact of his possible death and his knowledge of it is emphasised is possibly the recollection of an idea suggested in Book 1 that approaching death cleanses all bias, to reveal the naked truth.⁵⁵ It seems insupportable that this simple association could validate a possible super-

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.57, ln.1279-81.

"And death came, death's breath rivelled up the lies,/Left bare the metal thread, the fibre fine/Of truth, i' the spinning: the true words come last."

human objectivity in the Pope: especially as this same position of imminent death, removes from Guido's speech the last vestiges of decorum, when his innate anger is expressed directly as a last resort attack on those who have found him guilty, but leaves him approaching execution without an acceptance of his guilt.

After the substantial halt of Book 10, the degenerative structure continues on its downward slide, with Guido's second monologue coming very shortly after the rejection of his appeal.

With only a short time to live a new intensity enters Guido's speech, when the venom of his true feelings are directed at those who condemn him. The emergent truth is the externalization of traits like anger, hatred, and disappointment: noted in his first monologue. He achieves some degree of self-knowledge, but not enough to face death and collapses in utter defeat and humiliation. The cold-bloodedness with which he faces execution and for which he is acclaimed as courageous by the onlookers, *we* realise is an inability to confront his feelings. Hence, Guido comes full circle in his psychological exposition, once again withdrawing into his impregnable shell of self-esteem.

The circular structure reaches fulfilment in the final component, Book 12, which bears the reversed title of Book 1. In this, his epilogue, Browning introduces once again Bottinius, who only two days after the trial, is to take the strenuously established, single unchallengable truth to emerge from the trial - that of Pompilia's innocence, and turn it around completely to suit the needs of yet another trial: presenting the same case, to the same judges; making of established truth a falsehood. The poem has come full circle, the ring has been fashioned and truth, after a tour-de-force of all its possibilities, is as elusive as ever.

The parts are consolidated within the whole, by the function of irony transcending pluralistic isolation to achieve a single philosophical statement. Appearing fragmentary, *The Ring and the Book* has a very compact and intensely systematic structure: a readerly approach reveals that all parts bear relation to each other by a direct correspondence of ideas; within the principles of comparison and culminative pluralism. Only Book 10 fails to fit this organisation offering an alternative to the legitimate climax of Caponsacchi's account (as verified by Pompilia's almost identical testimony). With a forceful authorial voice, its dictatorial, perhaps even tyrannical, suppression of the reader and the all important constructive *readerly voice*, implies the omnipotent

presence of a celestial presence (echoed in the superior patriarchal representation of the Pope), rather than the celebrated earthly dimensions of the poem. Hence, it is a disruption to the logical continuity and structural rhythm of a work in which logical interpretation and balance is of paramount importance and the readerly approach singularly fundamental.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BROWNING, Robert, *The Ring and the Book* Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1990.
- COLMER, John, *Coleridge to Catch 22: Images of Society* Macmillan Press Ltd., London, 1978
- FORSTER, E.M., *Aspects of the Novel* Edward Arnold Ltd, London, 1963.
- HAIR, Donald. S., *Browning's Experiments with Genre* University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1972.
- HALLIDAY, F.E., *Robert Browning : Life and Works* Jupiter Books, London, 1975.
- MILL, J. S., *Three Essays : On Liberty* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985.
- TRACY, Clarence, *Browning's Mind and Art* Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh and London, 1968.