

ROBERT BROWNING'S "OBSCURITY" IN
MODERN PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Dianna Lynn Mullin

June 1968

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ABSTRACT

Browning's reputation for "obscurity" was established in the nineteenth century and this problem is the theme of some contemporary criticism of the poet's work. This thesis is an attempt to reassess the problem in light of current attitudes toward the nature and function of poetry.

The great majority of the Victorians who criticized Browning for being too difficult to understand were the reviewers of the popular periodicals of the period. An examination of their criticism reveals that most of those aspects of Browning's work which they called "obscure" were really simply characteristics of the poetry which did not conform to the popular concept of what poetry ought to be.

These criticisms of "obscurity," which were really objections to certain aspects of Browning's poetry which the Victorians disliked or which their reading habits made difficult for them, are re-examined in light of modern poetics. A comparison between the two attitudes shows that whereas the Victorians condemned Browning for his irregular syntax, his recondite allusions, and the subject matter with which he dealt, the modern poets and critics consider these things to be essential if poetry is to be successful.

However, in spite of the current general acceptance of the type of poetry which Browning wrote, a few contemporary critics tend to approach Browning as though he presents some special sort of problem. An examination of the work of three such critics indicates

that many modern Browning scholars implicitly accept the nineteenth century opinions and seek to explain Browning's "obscurity" as the manifestation of some abnormal psychological block, failing to recognize that the characteristics of Browning's poetry on which they base their arguments are generally thought to be acceptable and normal.

Since much of the modern work done on "obscurity" in Browning relies too heavily on the critical evaluations of the nineteenth century, the basis for the nineteenth century reaction to Browning calls for examination. The last section includes a scrutiny of one poem, "Fra Lippo Lippi," to determine what aspects of the poem may present difficulties to the reader. The study shows that the difficulties which the poem presents are real but that they are inherent in the style which Browning adopts, not caused by any inability of the poet to write clearly.

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Browning's poetic career came to birth with the publication of Pauline in 1833. However, the occasion was less than a happy one for the poet, for it marked the beginning of a series of complaints that Browning was difficult to read. The nineteenth century critics who could not understand what Browning wrote called Browning "obscure," and those aspects of his poetry which they could not comprehend they called "obscurities."

That there was much about Browning's poetry which the nineteenth century found difficult is perhaps not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that his reputation for unintelligibility endures in a century that claims such difficult poets as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as representatives of the age. Twentieth century scholars have often implicitly accepted the judgment of the last century by writing books and articles to explain why Browning apparently could not write clearly and have thus tended to ignore the problem of whether or not the charge of "obscurity" itself is a legitimate criticism of Browning's poetry. A great many of these modern explanations account for Browning's lack of clarity by attributing to the poet some psychological block which prevented him from putting his thoughts into clear language.

Because this problem of "obscurity" in Browning's work is still being given a great deal of attention by scholars, it seems profitable to re-examine the original charges made in the nineteenth century in light of modern criticism and to study the work which has been done

recently in this area of Browning scholarship to determine if there is a sort of difficulty in Browning's poetry which necessitates special explanations. The first part of this study will attempt to establish the characteristics of Browning's poetry which a great many Victorians found difficult to accept. These objections to Browning's poetry will be evaluated in the light of present attitudes toward the nature and function of poetry to determine if modern poets and critics would consider the criticisms legitimate. The second section will present three important twentieth century works which have dealt with the problem of Browning's "obscurity" as a manifestation of special psychological phenomena. Each work will be given close scrutiny and will be evaluated within the context of twentieth century criticism. Finally, because Browning does present certain difficulties to any reader, the study will attempt through analysis of one of Browning's poems to classify the several sorts of demands which Browning makes on his reader. If the demands go beyond those acceptable to modern criticism, then Browning can legitimately be criticized for "obscurity." If not, then special psychological explanations of Browning's poetry would seem to give way to a renewed emphasis upon the complex authenticity of Browning's poetry.

CHAPTER I

THE VICTORIAN VIEW

The critics of the nineteenth century who commented on Browning's poetry fall into two categories. There were a few men, such as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater, who saw in Browning, not obscurity, but a depth of thought which would not allow a cursory examination of his poetry. In a lengthy digression in an essay on George Chapman, Swinburne proclaimed Browning to be

something too much the reverse of obscure; he is too brilliant and subtle for the ready reader of a ready writer to follow with any certainty the track of an intelligence which moves with such incessant rapidity, or even to realise with what spiderlike swiftness and sagacity his building spirit leaps and lightens to and fro and backward and forward as it lives along the animated line of his labour, springs from thread to thread and darts from center to circumference of the glittering and quivering web of living thought woven from the inexhaustible stores of his perception and kindled from the inexhaustible fire of his imagination.¹

Echoing this same sentiment, Pater, when he reviewed Arthur Symonds'

Introduction to the Works of Browning, declared

It is true that "when the head has to be exercised before the heart there is chilling of sympathy." Of course, so intellectual a poet (and only the intellectual poet, as we have pointed out, can be adequate to modern demands) will have his difficulties. They were a part of the poet's choice of vocation and he was fully aware of them²

¹Algernon Charles Swinburne, "George Chapman," The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, ed. Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, Bonchurch Edition (New York, 1926), XII, 145-146.

²Walter Pater, "Browning," Essays From "The Guardian" (London and New York, 1906), p. 47.

It is unfortunate for Browning that the voice of praise came primarily from those who had little influence on public taste. The voice was small and easily drowned out by the overwhelming power of newspaper and periodical critics who really established Browning's reputation for obscurity. The periodical was coming of age during the reign of Victoria, and it wielded tremendous influence over the rising middle class, partially because

the age of periodicals was the age of a growing democracy, political and social, in which it was felt that a much larger reading public, still with little education and little political experience, simply had to be guided; and not, of course, by the old aristocracy, but by the new "aristocracy of talent" which edited and wrote the reviews. At the same time these middle-class readers, for their part were only too eager to attain culture--or the veneer of culture--that the periodicals could provide. They had neither the training nor the time to read scholarly treatises.³

But not only did the periodicals influence the taste of the public; the middle class public, in turn, determined the attitudes reflected in the periodicals they read. In a study of the middle class English reading public of the nineteenth century, Richard Altick discovered that "it was the ill-educated mass audience with pennies in its pocket that called the tune to which writers and editors danced."⁴ The dictatorship of the Victorian middle class over the periodicals was so complete that Frank Harris, editor of the Fortnightly toward the end of the century, said,

³Walter E. Houghton, "British Periodicals of the Victorian Age: Bibliographies and Indexes," Library Trends, VII (1959), 555.

⁴Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900 (Chicago, 1957), p. 5.

I had to be taught that to edit a review in London is not to be a priest in the Temple of the Spirit, but the shopman pander to a childish public with an insatiable appetite for whatever is conventional and commonplace.⁵

This desire for the conventional even determined how favorable a review a book of poetry or a novel might get. When William Delane, editor of the London Times around mid century, declined to review the then controversial Erehwon, he was supposed to have said, "Erehwon, I won't touch. It could not be reviewed as favorably as perhaps it deserves without alarming the goodies--and they are powerful."⁶

The influence of the middle class on the reception of poetry was particularly damaging, for one of the attitudes to which it gave expression in the Victorian age was especially negative toward poetry and the poet. Early in the century, Thomas Love Peacock declared,

A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete customs and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The brighter the light diffused around him by the progress of reason, the thicker the darkness of antiquated barbarism, in which he buries himself like a mole, to throw up the barren hillocks of his Cimmerian labours.⁷

There were some who opposed poetry so strongly that they claimed it was a "seducer; we had almost said a harlot. She may do to trifle with; but

⁵Frank Harris, Contemporary Portraits (New York, 1915), p. 129.

⁶The History of the "Times" (London, 1939), II, 491, cited by Oscar Maurer, "My Squeamish Public: Some Problems of Victorian Magazine Publishers and Editors," Studies in Bibliography, XII (1958), p. 33.

⁷Thomas Love Peacock, "The Four Ages of Poetry," The Works of Thomas Love Peacock, ed. Henry Cole (London, 1875), III, 335.

was to be to the state whose statesmen write verses, and whose lawyers read more in Tom Moore than in Bracton."⁸

The negative attitude that developed was partially the result of the rise of science. Mr. W. E. Houghton states in The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870,

Perhaps the most important development in nineteenth-century intellectual history was the extension of scientific assumptions and methods from the physical world to the whole life of man.⁹

Furthermore, in the field of science, it was not speculative science that was exalted, but rather the practical aspects of science that could bring about progress. Mr. Houghton explains that science meant "the art of mechanical contrivance available to anyone with an ingenious head."¹⁰ In fact, some felt that material advancements might even take the place of poetry. Mr. Jerome Buckley comments in The Victorian Temper that Dr. William Whewell saw the Great Exhibition of 1851 as

evidence that the inventive machinist might prove himself again and again the true Poet or Maker since "Man's power of making" he insisted, "may show itself not only in the beautiful texture of language, the grand machinery of the epic, the sublime display of poetical imagery, but in these material works."¹¹

⁸ Westminster Review, II (1824), 346, cited by Altick, p. 135.

⁹ Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven, Connecticut, 1957), p. 33.

¹⁰ Houghton, Frame, p. 113.

¹¹ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951), p. 127, quoting William Whewell, Lectures on the Results of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (London, 1852), p. 5.

As the century became more conscious of science, others began to agree with Peacock that poets act

as if there were no such things in existence as mathematicians, astronomers, chemists, moralists, metaphysicians, historians, politicians, and political economists¹²

Even those of the middle class who read poetry desired that it be practical. In order for it to be well liked and to be proclaimed good literature, it had to be written to benefit the masses. Many felt that

great poetry was ever meant, and to the end of time must be adapted, not to the curious student, but for the multitude who read while they run--for the crowd in the street, for the boards of huge theaters, and for the choirs of vast cathedrals, for an army marching tumultuous to the battle, and for an assembled nation silent over the tomb of its mightiest.¹³

Browning, however, did not tailor his poetry to please the large reading audience. Although of middle class origin, he often disregarded middle class attitudes, and almost without exception his middle class reviewers who found him "obscure" linked the charge of obscurity with some other criticism which reflects their attitude toward poetry during the Victorian Age.

Perhaps the most significant though least obvious of the areas in which Browning and the general reader differed was in their attitude toward metaphysics. When the critic of Harper's reviewed Sordello, his statement indicated a common conception of metaphysics. He declared,

¹²Peacock, 337.

¹³Eneas Sweetland Dallas, The Gay Science (London, 1866), II, 305, cited by Buckley, p. 147.

"Sordello" is one of the poems by Browning, which answers well the definition of metaphysics--where the reader doesn't know what the writer means, and the writer doesn't know what he means himself, that is metaphysics.¹⁴

The ordinary man did not understand metaphysical problems and resented being expected to deal with them. Therefore, Browning was being "obscure" if his poetry became too philosophical. Browning's poetry was called "metaphysics in rhythm."¹⁵ Red Cotton Night Cap Country was a "very enigmatical poem . . . quite as mystical in its pseudo-philosophy . . . as anything he has ever written."¹⁶ The reviews complained of the same poem that Browning "subtilizes thought till expression grows provokingly obscure."¹⁷ Reviewing Fifine at the Fair, the critic of The Westminster Review complained, "There [is] such . . . metaphysical hair-splitting that reading becomes a positive fatigue."¹⁸

According to Browning himself, it was the nature of the subject, the "development of a soul," that turned the many away and interested only the few. In his dedication of the poem to Joseph Millsand when it was reprinted in 1863, Browning explained,

. . . my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always

¹⁴Note on Sordello, Harper's Magazine, XIII (1856), 428.

¹⁵Review of Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, New Englander, XXXIII (1874), 495.

¹⁶Review of Red Cotton Night Cap Country, Harper's Magazine, XLVII (1873), 461.

¹⁷Review of Red Cotton Night Cap Country, Scribner's Monthly, VI (1873), 373.

¹⁸Review of Fifine at the Fair, The Westminster Review, XLII, New Series (1872), 546.

thought so--you, with many known and unknown to me, think
so--others may one day think so; . . .¹⁹

Perhaps the poem seemed difficult to his critics, but Browning makes clear that he is satisfied that the poem says what he intended for it to say. At the same time, he recognized that not everyone would understand the poem. However, he implied the fault was not his alone, but that it also lay with those readers who failed to give the poem its due. He wrote,

My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man
or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails
the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all
myself, who did my best then and since; for I lately gave time
and pains to turn my work into what the many might,--instead
of what the few must,--like: but after all, I imagined
another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it

It has already been noted that literature, and poetry in particular, was judged above all in terms of its didactic power, its moral usefulness."²⁰ If the didactic purpose of the poem were not clear, it could not be fully understood. When the periodical reviewers confused morality and artistry they were probably acting under the influence of the great critics of the age. After all, Matthew Arnold had written in Essays in Criticism,

a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt
against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is
a poetry of indifference towards life.²¹

¹⁹Robert Browning, Dedication of Sordello, The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, Cambridge Edition (Boston, 1895), p. 74. All further references to Browning's work will be from this edition.

²⁰Altick, p. 136.

²¹Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism, Second Series (London, 1911), p. 144.

However, the reviewers had a different, a less sophisticated idea of what Arnold meant by morality, and they gave the term a narrow interpretation.

One can not deny that Browning was concerned with right and wrong, but when his views did not coincide with the middle-class concept of morality, his critics claimed the moral was "scarcely comprehensible."²² If his poems were not clearly didactic, they were confusing to many of his readers. When Parleyings was reviewed, the critic said,

Let any sensible man outside the Browning Society dig into the mysterious volume of literary hocus-pocus that has recently been so solemnly reviewed and see whether he can find a single passage likely to stir the pulses of any man or woman, or create the desire to lead a higher, a holier, and a more useful life We were never in greater need of good poets, and never better able than in this practical age to do without literary medicine men and mystery mongers.²³

Browning often mentioned subjects which were considered inappropriate, and the critic of the Irish Quarterly Review declared, "the subjects of the poems themselves [sic] are the most tasteless, and the most unmeaning it is possible to conceive" ²⁴ N. P. S. Wiseman writing in the Rambler saw in the Men and Women volume

a keen enjoyment of dirt as such, a poking of the nose into dunghills and the refuse of hospitals, into beggars' wallets and into Jews' "old-do" bags" accompanied by a peculiar

²²Review of Red Cotton Night Cap Country, Harper's Magazine XLVII (1873), 461.

²³O. Wilde, "The Poets and the People, By One of the Latter," Pall Mall Gazette, XIV (February 17, 1887), 4.

²⁴H. J. G., "Poetry Under a Cloud," Irish Quarterly Review, VI (1856), 22.

grunt which expresses not only the pleasure experienced, but also the nature of the experiencer.²⁵

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon was a

very puzzling and unpleasant piece of business. The plot is plain enough, but the acts and feelings of the characters are inscrutable and abhorrent, and their language is as strange as their proceedings.²⁶

The Men and Women volume was proof

that poetry may be written a great deal worse, in some respects, than anything which has yet passed under our review;--profounder shadow, more conceited pretension, more offensive perversity It gambols; it spins webs; it raves; but it shows no purpose, or tendency, or effect, in any high, moral direction.²⁷

Even after Browning was claimed as a great religious teacher, this search for a moral meaning that often is not present in Browning caused needless misinterpretation. Francis Duckworth comments that when J. T. Nettleship presented a distorted interpretation of "Saul,"

the misunderstanding arises, clearly, from Nettleship's determination that the poem shall at all costs be shown to have a moral--"For us of to-day, then" he asks, "what is the lesson which the poet would teach?"²⁸

Duckworth points out that the only way Browning's critics could grasp the message of "Any Wife to Any Husband"

was to assume that when the poet said one thing he meant something quite different. Thus "Any Wife to Any Husband"

²⁵[N. P. S. Wiseman], Review of Men and Women, Rambler, V (1856), 57.

²⁶Review of A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, The Athenaeum, February 18, 1843, p. 166.

²⁷Review of Men and Women, The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany, LX (1856), 139.

²⁸Francis R. G. Duckworth, Browning: Background and Conflict (Hamden, Connecticut, 1906), p. 73.

would never yield up its secret if the readers started with the assumption that the title had any reference to the subject matter of the poem. As soon, however, as it was perceived that "Any Wife to Any Husband" really meant "The Chance of Widowers Abiding in Their Loneliness," then the whole significance of the poem leapt out full and clear, and was seen to be very beautiful and pathetic.²⁹

A second result of the middle class desire for utilitarian poetry was the demand that it be written in simple language. Since "it was the artist's first duty to communicate . . . his message . . . of social and, therefore, moral significance,"³⁰ poetry "could be useful only if it were stripped of its decoration and made into a strictly functional vehicle for the expression of ideas."³¹ Thus when Browning's language was not as straightforward as prose, his poetry was "obscure and perplexing in its twisted and tortured sentences."³² His "breaks, digressions, involutions, crabbed constructions,"³³ his "contortions, and dissections of the language" made Browning "pre-eminently the King of Darkness."³⁴ When Browning refused to simplify his language he was condemned not only for being obscure, but also for being self-indulgent and stubborn. Browning,

²⁹Duckworth, p. 29.

³⁰Buckley, p. 10.

³¹Altick, p. 136.

³²Review of Red Cotton Night Cap Country, Harper's Magazine XLVII (August, 1873), p. 461.

³³Review of Fifine at the Fair, The Westminster Review, 546.

³⁴N. J. G., op. cit., 23.

instead of looking on his gifts of imagination, and of intellect as entrusted to him for the benefit of others, and as imposing on him the duty of training their rude forces into a perfect faculty of song, he has just got out of them the utmost personal pleasure that they would yield with the least possible trouble.³⁵

The London Quarterly reviewer commented that Browning "either cannot or will not put his ideas into their simplest and most intelligible forms, but clothes them in a quaint and outlandish dress of words"³⁶

Another circumstance causing the critics of the nineteenth century to find Browning obscure was that he often dealt with characters and subject matter that were unfamiliar and "un-English," subjects often both geographically and historically remote. The dislike of the foreign was in part a reflection of the intense nationalistic feeling that was prevalent in the middle classes during the Victorian age. Browning, it was said, "writes for men--for men and women--but not for Englishmen."³⁷ Commenting on Browning's lack of appeal to the English, a writer for Chamber's Journal says,

The obstacles to his popularity are . . . manifold. He has chosen to make his dwelling in Italy, and to select from thence the subjects of his muse. His preference for that spot is undisguised, and to Englishmen, almost repulsive. At all events, under such circumstances, a poet can scarcely expect to be accepted in his own country.

³⁵Review of Men and Women, Fraser's Magazine, LIII (1856), 105.

³⁶F. T. Marzials, Review of Selections, London Quarterly Review, XX (1863), 528.

³⁷E. P. Hood, Review of Selections, Eclectic Review, IV, New Series (1863), 438.

His topic being thus alien, to begin with, he takes pains to deprive it still more of interest by selecting the period of action two or three hundred years back³⁸

Browning, a reviewer asserted,

scarcely seems at home amongst us. He is hardly an Englishman It would seem that into this English body of his the soul of some thirteenth-century Italian painter has got by mistake, and many of the poems are the signs it makes in trying to be recognized. Mr. Browning says elsewhere,

"Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, 'Italy.'"

Now, it is a wholesome prejudice with us, that if a man is to write for Englishmen, the first condition of national fame is that he be an Englishman; and if he opens his heart to us, we expect to read "England" written there; or, such of us as are Scotchmen, "Great Britain," at least if the great poet is to mirror back human nature, and bring it home to us clearly conveyed, he must . . . show us how much may be hidden under the film of familiarity³⁹

It might be easier to understand why these elements in Browning's poetry caused the British public to consider him obscure if one considers the varying possibilities of a poet's relationship to his reader. C. K. Stead, in an interesting study of early twentieth-century poetry, says,

A poem may be said to exist in a triangle, the points of which are, first, the poet, second, his audience, and third, that area of experience which we call variously "Reality," "Truth," or "Nature." Between these points run lines of tension, and depending on the time, the place, the poet, and the audience, these lines will lengthen or shorten.⁴⁰

³⁸"A Poet Without a Public," Chamber's Journal, XIX, Third Series (1863), 91.

³⁹[F. H. Evans], "The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning," North British Review, XXXIV (1861), 353.

⁴⁰C. K. Stead, The New Poetic (New York, 1964), p. 21.

The Victorians expected their poets to teach and their poetry to present the familiar, conventional aspects of life in the simplest language. Stead contends that those poets of the nineteenth century who were popular with the masses wrote the sort of poetry their readers found comfortable. In other words, they were too close to their audience and too far from reality. They "insist [ed] that the concern of poetry is 'Truth'; but their 'Truth,' seen from this distance, seems most often an agreed middle-class simplification."⁴¹

However, Browning never identified himself with his audience, and his poetry was proclaimed unintelligible chiefly because he did not write what the public wanted. Concerning a similar phenomenon in modern poetry, Randall Jarrell wrote,

when someone says to me something I am not accustomed to hearing, or do not wish to hear, I say to him: I do not understand you; and we respond in just this way to poets.⁴²

Swinburne and Pater were exceptions because they found in Browning not obscurity but brilliance, but they were both Aesthetes and "concerned to remove themselves from the inhibiting demands of a conventional audience."⁴³

Browning was always aware of his position in relation to his audience. In a letter to John Ruskin written in 1855, Browning asked,

⁴¹Stead, p. 12.

⁴²Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," Discovering Modern Poetry, ed. Elizabeth Drew and George Connor (New York, 1962), pp. 347-348.

⁴³Stead, p. 13.

Do you think poetry was ever generally understood--or can be?
 Is the business of it to tell people what they know already,
 as they know it, and so precisely that they shall be able to
 cry out--"Here you should supply this--that you evidently pass
 over, and I'll help you from my own stock"? . . . Do you believe
 people understand Hamlet? . . . I shall never change my point
 of sight, or feel other than disconcerted and apprehensive when⁴⁴
 the public critics and all, begin to understand and approve me.

⁴⁴This complete letter appears in The Works of John Ruskin, ed.
 E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1909), XXXVI, xxiv-xxxvi.

CHAPTER II

THE VICTORIAN VIEW AND MODERN CRITICISM

The bases of the early charges of obscurity made against Browning are clear. Browning's reputation as an unintelligible poet was a result of the critics' viewing poetry primarily as a means by which the poet was to teach and edify as many of the readers as he could reach. If a poet considered abstract, metaphysical problems that his semi-educated audience could not grasp, if he used unusual syntax that could not be easily understood when read "on the run," if he dealt with characters and events foreign to his audience, if he did not make his moral position unmistakably clear, he was limiting his possible audience and hindering those who did read him from grasping some assumed lesson by being "wilfully obscure."

In order to determine how these charges of obscurity made in the nineteenth century ought to be evaluated from a twentieth-century perspective, it is necessary first to consider the dominant current view of the nature and function of poetry.

In the early part of this century, with the early work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the Imagists, there was a movement away from the view that the poet was to write in order to teach his readers as the nineteenth century had demanded and toward the idea that the poet writes in order to concretize abstract experience. The poet, being more sensitive than other men, perceives relationships

that they do not. The man without the poet's perception sees his experiences as

chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. [He] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.¹

Within these relationships, the poet is also aware of "various tensions,"

tensions between self and other persons, between self and physical environment, between love and antagonism, between one's impulses and the decisions of rational thought, between the life-urge and the dark fascination of death.²

When he writes, he puts his perceptions and realizations into the concrete form of imagery and metaphor. In poetry he is "amalgamating disparate experience"³ by "finding suitable word combinations to represent some aspect or other of the pervasive living tension."⁴ The poet goes through this process, not in order to communicate any message about the experience, but rather to relieve himself of the tension which the perception causes within him. Eliot says,

[The poet] is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation he has no face, no name, nothing; and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. In other words again, he is going to all that trouble, not in order to

¹Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Selected Essays (New York, 1950), p. 247.

²Phillip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington, Indiana, 1962), p. 46.

³Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," p. 247.

⁴Wheelwright, pp. 47-48.

communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort; and when the words are finally arranged in the right way--or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find--he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. And then he can say to the poem; "Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book--and don't expect me to take any further interest in you."⁵

One can not say what the poem means because the experience can not be translated into denotative language. Comparing this aspect of poetry to other art forms, John Ciardi asks,

What for example does a dance "mean"? Or what does music "mean"? Or what does a juggler "mean" when we watch him with such admiration of his skill? All these forms--and poetry with them--have meaning only as they succeed in being good performances.⁶

Archibald MacLeish explains the same characteristic of poetry in

"Ars Poetica" when he says,

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown,

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds

.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

⁵Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1957), p. 107.

⁶John Ciardi, How Does A Poem Mean? (Boston, 1960), p. 670.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea.

A poem should not mean
But be.⁷

The critic, then, when evaluating poetry, ought not to place
priority on what the poem says. Indeed,

the true nature of a poem's performance of itself . . . is
so lightly concerned with its essay-content, that it may
reasonably serve the purposes of good reading to pretend that
there are no facts in the poem. A poet must believe
something passionately enough to have strong feelings about
it, but what that something is in actual fact is the item of
least consequence as far as participating in the poetic
performance is concerned.⁸

Instead the critic should attempt

to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be; one might say--though
it is long since I have employed such terms with any assurance--
endeavouring to grasp its entelechy.⁹

If the poet succeeds in finding the right words and putting
them together in just the right way, it is the reader who profits,
for he can participate in the experience with the poet. But the
experience transcends words. Ciardi states,

Most readers tend to lose sight of this force in poetry--of
this sub-surface release of pictures from the psyche--because

⁷Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," Collected Poems, 1917-1952
(Boston, 1952), p. 87.

⁸Ciardi, pp. 768-769.

⁹Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," On
Poetry and Poets, p. 122.

they tend to think of poems as made of words only Feelings, suggestions, images arise out of the words and run free of them.¹⁰

The poet is like a juggler,

tossing his words in the air and catching them and tossing them again--what a grand stunt! Then suddenly one may be astonished to find that the poet is not simply juggling cups, saucers, roses, rhymes and other random objects, but the very stuff of life. And discovering that, one discovers that seeing the poet's ideas flash so in the air, seeing them performed under such control, is not only a reward in itself, but a living experience that deepens every man's sense of life.¹¹

Along with the shift in the view of the nature and function of poetry has come, of course, a change in the poet's attitude toward his readers. "By 1930," says C. K. Stead, most poets "had succeeded in establishing that it was the poet's task first to write good poems, and only his second task to please an audience."¹² To illustrate, he quotes Ezra Pound as saying, "[I quarrel with] that infamous remark of Whitman's about poets needing an audience."¹³ Since the poet is not attempting to convey meaning, he need only satisfy himself that he has successfully translated his emotion into poetic language. In fact, if he is successful, he necessarily places limits on his audience. Since his perceptions are complex, "fullness of expression and wide range of public intelligibility are contrary aims, which are generally found to be in conflict."¹⁴

¹⁰Ciardi, p. 707.

¹¹Ciardi, p. 670.

¹²Stead, p. 54.

¹³Stead, p. 109.

¹⁴Wheelwright, pp. 36-37.

Therefore, a poet's worth is no longer measured by the size of his audience as it was in the nineteenth century. T. S. Eliot contends that

. . . if a poet gets a large audience very quickly, that is a rather suspicious circumstance: for it leads us to fear that he is not really doing anything new, that he is only giving people what they are already used to, and therefore what they have already had from the poets of the previous generation.¹⁵

Because poetry is not aimed at the masses and because its first duty is not to teach, but to put experience into language, the kind of poetry written today is naturally quite different from that admired in the nineteenth century. Whereas Browning's critics were deeply influenced by the rise of science in the last century and attempted to judge the language of poetry as they would that of a scientific treatise, modern poets and critics see the two spheres of interest as entirely separate. Those poets and critics who made up the Southern New Critics base their system on "a division of art and science into two independent, objective and equally valid categories of experience. Science and poetry are the opposite poles of truth."¹⁶ Likewise, I. A. Richards, though his type of criticism is different from that of the new critics and of Eliot and Pound, agrees with this separation of poetry from science. He makes a

¹⁵Thomas Stearns Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets, p. 11.

¹⁶Robert Wooster Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Wooster Stallman (New York, 1949), p. 494.

distinction between the "statements" of science and the "pseudo-statements" of poetry and sees these pseudo statements as "pivotal points in the organization of the mind, vital to its well-being" ¹⁷

Therefore, the modern critic would not oppose "metaphysics in verse," which may also involve a kind of pseudo-statement, for this is one of poetry's legitimate concerns. The poet is interested in the material, physical world only as a source of images and metaphors to express the realities of existence. In this use of metaphorical language to express their view of reality, the modern poets are very like the Metaphysical Poets of the seventeenth century who "raise, even when they do not explicitly discuss, the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses." ¹⁸ In fact, Robert Wooster Stallman, writing on "The New Critics" has said, "It is Donne who has dominated our poetic and critical climate." ¹⁹ With the use of the metaphysical conceit, the seventeenth-century poets were revealing analogies between the relationships of abstract concepts and those of concrete objects. By using analogy the Metaphysical Poet "intended to express honestly, if unconventionally, the poet's sense of the complexities and contradictions of life." ²⁰ Cleanth Brooks says that

¹⁷I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (New York, 1926), p. 71.

¹⁸Helen Gardner, The Metaphysical Poets (Oxford, 1961), p. xxx.

¹⁹Stallman, p. 502.

²⁰William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, Revised by C. Hugh Holman (New York, 1960), p. 284.

metaphysical poetry includes the "opposite and discordant qualities of an experience" and compares it to I. A. Richards "poetry of synthesis" which has, Richards says, "extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses. But they are more than heterogeneous, they are opposed."²¹ And Eliot has already been quoted as saying that the modern poet is "amalgamating disparate experience."²²

In the attempt to relate complex experience by analogy, the poet must sometimes be ambiguous. Brooks says,

The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes, necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.²³

Moreover, the modern poet's desire to be all inclusive, as were the Metaphysical Poets, results in certain characteristics of style similar to those of Donne and his contemporaries. Metaphysical poetry, says Helen Gardner, is marked by

concise expression, achieved by an elliptical syntax, and accompanied by a staccato rhythm in prose and a certain deliberate roughness in versification in poetry.²⁴

²¹Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1939), p. 41, quoting I. A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism.

²²Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," p. 247.

²³Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (New York, 1947), pp. 9-10.

²⁴Gardner, p. xxi.

On the modern poet's use of language, John Press writes,

The truth is that all poets whose apprehension of the world is peculiarly complex or passionate are likely to employ an unusual vocabulary of an uncommon syntax, or both, in order to convey with the utmost exactitude the unique quality of their vision To grumble that a poet is not using language plainly is to forget that there are times when for him to do so would be insincere much fine poetry is found to be condemned as obscure, if only because a poet, whose first loyalty is to his daimon, will intuitively reject the slackness, the low tension, and the generalities of everyday prose, the thin, greasy coinage of lazy thought and tepid feeling. He will not hesitate to go beyond the confines of a commonplace vocabulary, or to break the codified rules of grammar which are devised to simplify the business of living. In doing so, he will outrage the prejudices of those who resent any violation of their intellectual and emotional routine for, as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, new poetry tends to disturb the conventional consciousness "by its syntax more than by its sentiments," and all versification "is essentially a disturbance of the conventional language."²⁵

The disruption of language is necessary if the poet is to function as he must. The nature of the experience he is trying to verbalize makes it unavoidable. Eliot declares,

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.²⁶

This comprehensiveness which the poet is trying to achieve allows him to include allusions to recondite matters, references to

²⁵John Press, The Chequer'd Shade: Reflections on Obscurity in Poetry (New York, 1958), pp. 23-24.

²⁶Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," p. 248.

material not familiar to his readers, and foreign terms because he is not primarily trying to explain an idea to his readers, but rather to do the best in his power to embody the idea in language, no matter who understands.

The desire to be inclusive also allows the poet to write about those aspects of life which the Victorian critics would have found immoral. In trying to see wholeness of the universe the poet sees his poem as "moral only in being complete, in being healthy, a true mimesis of 'things as they are,' a product of the undivided sensibility in tune with 'the Nature of Things.'"²⁷ In this sense, Victorian poetry was immoral in that it "was a poetry of sharp exclusions"²⁸ that became sentimentalized. "Sentimentality," says Brooks,

nearly always involves an oversimplification of the experience in question. The sentimentalist takes a short cut to intensity by removing all the elements of the experience which might conceivably militate against the intensity . . . the sentimental poet makes us feel that he is sacrificing the totality of his vision in favor of a particular interpretation.²⁹

C. K. Stead remarks,

The emphasis both Hulme and Pound put on "art", or the technique of poetry and the process by which a poem crystalized out of experience, was a means of escape from an alternative of sentiment and morals in verse.³⁰

²⁷Stead, p. 147, quoting T. S. Eliot.

²⁸Brooks, Tradition, p. 74.

²⁹Brooks, Tradition, p. 37.

³⁰Stead, p. 99.

Because the poet's desire is to be inclusive, he can write about anything he chooses.

The poetry of the Victorian period is marked by direct contrasts to the poetry of the present:

The weakening of metaphor, the development of a specifically "poetic" subject matter and diction, the emphasis on simplicity and clarity, the simplification of the poet's attitude, the segregation of the witty and the ironical from the serious, the stricter separation of the various genres--all these items testify to the monopoly of the scientific spirit.³¹

Modern poetry is "opposed to that poetry which merely makes agreeable, high sounding propositions, or which merely mentions 'beautiful' objects."³²

However, in a period in which science and poetry are separated, and the poet is attempting to write about the universe, his words, though of a different sort than those of the scientist, are just as accurate although they are poetic. Gilbert Highet, writing about "Obscurity in Poetry" in The Powers of Poetry, says,

The universe is so vast, the universe is so various, that we owe it to ourselves to try to understand every kind of experience--both the usual and the remote, both the intelligible and the mystical. Logic is not enough. Not all the truth about the world, or about our own lives, can be set down in straightforward prose, or even in straightforward poetry.³³

In the light of the current views of poetry which have been cited, it seems unlikely that a modern critic or poet would condemn

³¹Brooks, Tradition, p. 52.

³²Brooks, Tradition, p. 17.

³³Gilbert Highet, The Powers of Poetry (New York, 1960), p. 346.

poetry for obscurity if the obscurity were a result of an attempt to verbalize experience. They certainly would not expect a poet to rid his verse of concern with metaphysical problems, nor would they condemn him for unusual syntax or an unconventional use of language. He would also respect a poet's right to use unfamiliar allusions or characters in his poetry if he succeeded in saying exactly what he desired to say. And last, he certainly would not object to a poet's refraining from making moral judgments in verse. Therefore, with respect to Browning, it seems necessary for modern critics, in order to avoid inconsistency, to dismiss the objections of obscurity made against Browning in the nineteenth century. This is not to say that Browning is not sometimes difficult, but rather that the modern view of poetry makes this sort of obscurity necessary.

Indeed, Browning's attitude toward poetry seems to be very like this attitude of the majority of modern poets. In spite of the common view that Browning was a teacher, it may well be that when he wrote, he did not do so in order to convey a message. Francis Thompson, writing in the Academy, said that he was

unable to find that Browning had, or thought himself to have, any message. There are incidental utterances of wisdom in him, as in all but the slenderest poets; but, for the most part, he was essentially a questioner, who speculated upon all things and was content to answer: "Thus men do; what it all means, and what is the issue of the play, I shall find out when my part in it is played."³⁴

³⁴Francis Thompson, "Academy Portraits," Academy, LI (1897), 500.

Browning himself, early in his correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett, made clear that he did not write in order to teach. In a letter dated February 11, 1845, he declared,

I write from a thorough conviction that it is the duty of me, and with the belief that, after every drawback and shortcoming, I do my best, all things considered--that is for me, and, so being, the not being listened to by one human creature would, I hope, in nowise affect me.³⁵

Like Eliot, Browning did not seem to enjoy writing, but did so because he, too, was "haunted by a demon." He wrote, to Elizabeth on March 12, 1845,

I have no pleasure in writing, myself--none, in the mere act--though all pleasure in the sense of fulfilling a duty, whence, if I have done my real best, judge how heart-breaking a matter must it be to be pronounced a poor creature by critic this and acquaintance the other.³⁶

How very much Browning's words resemble those of Eliot which have already been quoted:

When the words are finally arranged in the right way . . . he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution

And after Browning had completed his poem, he like Eliot, took no further interest in the poem. Once the experience had been put into language, his part had been done. He could also say to his poem, "Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book--and don't expect me to take any further interest in you."

³⁵The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett (New York, 1899), I, pp. 17-18.

³⁶Letters, I, pp. 33-34.

Like the moderns, Browning attempted to be inclusive. His dramatic monologues reflect the great variety of life. He gave as much care to the presentation of the character of Guido as to that of Pompilia. He saw life as a complex thing that in order to be presented accurately had to be presented in its fullness.

Julia Wedgewood once accused him of being as concerned with evil as with good, of not caring if he "fetch [ed] fire from Heaven or Hell so that one's torch burns brightly," and admonished him that "the artist mind demands intensity above everything else, and there are some things you can't set squared with that Gospel."³⁷ His answer reflects his need to include everything in poetry. He wrote in reply,

It is one of the facts of my experience that one limits sorrowfully one's pretension to influence other people for good: I live more and more--what am I to write?--for God not man--I don't care what men think now, knowing they will never think my thoughts; yet I need increasingly to tell the truth--for whom? Is it that I shall be the better, the larger for it, have the fairer start in next life, the firmer stand? Is it pure selfishness or the obedience to a natural law?³⁸

Also like the modern poets because the concepts he saw were complex, Browning resorted to the language of analogy in order to put into concrete form abstract ideas. In this respect, he was influenced by Donne and the Metaphysical Poets as much as were the moderns. Joseph E. Duncan in his article on the "Intellectual Kinship

³⁷Robert Browning and Julia Wedgewood: A Broken Friendship As Revealed by Their Letters, ed. Richard Curle (New York, 1937), p. 29.

³⁸Robert Browning and Julia Wedgewood, pp. 33-34.

of John Donne and Robert Browning" presents a convincing argument to show that "many of Browning's techniques resemble those of Donne more closely than those of any other poet . . . ,"³⁹ He points out that Browning was interested in "correspondences" and that he had a "talent for perceiving analogies between the various realms of being."⁴⁰ Browning felt that "poetry should reveal 'the correspondency of the university to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual and of the actual to the ideal.'"⁴¹

Like the modern poets, Browning is interested in putting into language the truth he sees about the universe, the "ultimates" which one can convey only in poetic language. His letter to Ruskin, which has already been cited, is his clearest statement of this view of poetry:

We don't read poetry the same way, by the same law; it is too clear. I know that I don't make out my conception by my language, all poetry being a putting the infinite within the finite. You would have me point it all plain out, which can't be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which succeed if they bear the conception from me to you. You ought, I think, to keep pace with the thought tripping from ledge to ledge of my "glaciers," as you call them; not stand poking your alpenstock into the holes, and demonstrating that no foot could have stood there;--suppose it sprang over there? In prose you may criticise so--because that is the absolute representation of portions of truth,

³⁹Joseph E. Duncan, "The Intellectual Kinship of John Donne and Robert Browning," Studies in Philology, L (1953), 87-88.

⁴⁰Duncan, 85.

⁴¹Duncan, 85, quoting Browning's "Essay on Shelley."

what chronicling is to history--but in asking for more ultimates you must accept less mediates, nor expect that a Druid stone-circle will be traced for you with as few breaks to the eye as the North Crescent and South Crescent that go together so cleverly in many a suburb.⁴²

Perhaps Browning could have said to Ruskin and to his critics what Eliot says to the modern reader:

If you complain that a poet is obscure, and apparently ignoring you, the reader, or that he is speaking only to a limited circle of initiates from which you are excluded--remember that what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning.⁴³

The similarities between Browning and the modern poets have been noted time and again, but they have been underestimated. In fact, in the area of obscurity, the similarities have been virtually ignored. Modern critics have not evaluated Browning's obscurity on the same basis as they would that of a modern poet. Instead, they have too easily accepted the judgements of the nineteenth century periodical reviewers and seen in Browning an abnormal inability to express his thoughts clearly.

⁴²In Works of Ruskin, XXXVI, xxxiv-xxxvi.

⁴³Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," pp. 111-112.

CHAPTER III

THREE CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

In the twentieth century there have been three important works written to explain the cause of obscurity in Browning's poetry, and they approach the problem in a similar manner. Accepting the judgment of the nineteenth-century critics that Browning is unusually obscure, Betty Miller in Robert Browning: A Portrait,¹ Francis Duckworth in Browning: Background and Conflict,² and Stewart Holmes in "Browning: Semantic Stutterer"³ have declared that there are in Browning's life and personality certain characteristics which are evidence of a psychological problem which caused him to be inconsistent and contradictory in his poetry. All of these writers have claimed that Browning's hesitancy to talk about his own poetry and his concern with his dress and appearance are unusual traits for a poet. Moreover, they each contend that the headaches from which Browning suffered most of his life had a psychological origin. Finally, all of these critics cite certain contradictions which they find in Browning's poetry which they consider to be proof of Browning's inability to express himself clearly. Using the same data, they have constructed three different arguments to explain why Browning was obscure.

¹Betty Miller, Robert Browning: A Portrait, (London, 1952).

²Francis R. G. Duckworth, Browning: Background and Conflict (Hamden, Connecticut, 1966).

³Stewart Holmes, "Browning: Semantic Stutterer," PMLA, LX (1945), 231-255.

Although Betty Miller's book is a biography and deals with more than just the problem of obscurity, she devotes a great deal of attention to this aspect of Browning's work. She has traced all of Browning's difficulties in this area to an unusually strong attachment between Browning and his mother. Though she admits that "singularly little has been said, either by [Mrs. Orr] or by any subsequent writer" about Sara Anna Browning, Mrs. Miller somehow concludes that the Browning household "was pre-eminently a matriarchal one." She contends that the "assumption" that Browning's father was the "decisive influence in the life of his son" is indicated only "superficially," and that "it was neither the personality nor the authority of a dominant father that regulated the tempo of the domestic life" of Browning's early home.⁴ However, her argument is particularly weak, for her only proof is that Browning's father was a "tender hearted being" and, therefore, surely could not be dominant.⁵ Moreover, Mrs. Miller sees a psychological connection between the headaches from which Browning suffered and the illnesses of his mother. Mrs. Miller contends, "No sooner was the mother indisposed than the son, too, suffered: as promptly, when the mother recovered, the son, in turn, regained his health. Browning's ill health, she says, "persisted as long as he continued to live in the same house as his mother." She

⁴Miller, pp. 5-7.

⁵Miller, p. 6.

continues,

The recurrent complaint is always headache; his own, and that of his mother. "I will write more tomorrow--the stupid head will not be quiet to-day--my mother's is sadly affected too" . . . "I am quite well to-day, and my mother is quite well" . . . "I am not too well this morning, and write with an aching head. My mother's suffering continues too" . . . "I am much better to-day; and my mother is better" . . .⁶

It is certainly not unusual that over a period of more than a year and a half there might be times when both Browning and his mother were ill and other times when they were both well. And since Browning's headaches continued to trouble him after his marriage and even after his mother's death, there is very little evidence of any real connection between his illnesses and those of his mother.

At any rate, Mrs. Miller claims that indeed there was a particularly strong attachment and that it led Browning to make a decision in his youth which affected all his later work and which was the cause of his obscurity. When Browning was first introduced to Shelley's work he was greatly influenced by him, so much so that for a while he adopted Shelley's atheism. But he soon decided to reject atheism, Mrs. Miller states, because he did not wish to hurt his mother, who was devoutly religious. Mrs. Miller declares,

The ideals of Shelley and those of Sarah Anna Browning could not continue to exist under the same roof; the moment had come in which he must either deny his "wild dreams of beauty and of good," or irreparably wound and alienate his mother, "the one being," we are told, "whom he entirely loved." Faced with this deadlock between head and heart, Browning found his own solution. Reason divided him from the one being he could

⁶Miller, pp. 13-14.

love: reason, therefore, must be sacrificed. With a truly Herculean effort, which seems to have absorbed all his youth's strength, Browning performed upon himself an act of regrafting; reversing deliberately, the laws of his own growth Forcibly, in the course of this struggle, reason was dethroned and degraded; that "power Repressed" as he had it, "to LOVE" became, thenceforward, more important than "to KNOW."⁷

Mrs. Miller contends that this decision to forsake reason caused Browning to be reticent about his poetry and his personal life and to be obscure in his poetry because he was afraid to be truly honest with himself or with others. Quoting out of context line 210 from Pauline, Mrs. Miller claims that what

Robert Browning wished to conceal, not only from the public view but from his own conscience, was the occasion on which, as he afterwards put it, I "flung All honour from my soul."⁸

The context of the line from Pauline seems to imply just the opposite of what Mrs. Miller contends. Browning says,

And if thou livest, if thou lovest, spirit!
Remember me who set this final seal
To wandering thought--that one so pure as thou
Could never die. Remember me who flung
All honour from my soul, yet paused and said
"There is one spark of love remaining yet,
. . . . I was thine in shame
And here am I the scoffer, who have probed
Life's vanity, won by a word again
Into my own life"⁹ (ll. 206-211, 225, 236-238)

Browning "flung all honour from [his] soul" when he accepted Shelley's atheism, not when he rejected it.

⁷Miller, pp. 10-11.

⁸Miller, p. 10.

⁹Browning, Complete Works, p. 6.

Later, Mrs. Miller continues,

This early reticence, the need to cover up what must on no account be seen, remained with him to the end of his days; taking, in its several manifestations, an extreme and sometimes even a violent form. We have seen the effect on his work; after the inadvertent self-exposure of Pauline, the search for a denser, a more adhesive disguise: the adoption of the dramatic form, in collusion with which he was enabled for so many years effectively to outwit the proctors of society. The most successful disguise of all, of course, was language itself: there can be little doubt that much of the obscurity of Robert Browning was an involuntary form of self-protection.¹⁰

The idea that Browning's decision that one must reject the supremacy of reason was the result of an unusual attachment to his mother can be hardly more than conjecture.

The decision may well have been prompted by what Browning believed to be an intuitive knowledge of God. Everything that Browning has said about the experience indicates that his decision was just a step in his maturation, and that he rejected Shelley's atheism as naturally as he eventually rejected Shelley's vegetarian diet. That Browning was not ashamed of his decision is indicated in a conversation between Browning and Mrs. Orr which she recorded in The Contemporary Review:

"I know the difficulty of believing," he once said to me, when some question had arisen concerning the Christian scheme of salvation. "I know all that may be said against it, on the ground of history, of reason, of even moral sense. I grant even that it may be a fiction. But I am none the less convinced that the life and death of Christ, as Christians apprehend them, supply something which their humanity requires, and that it is true for them.

¹⁰ Miller, p. 105.

He then proceeded to say why, in his judgement, humanity required Christ. "The evidence of Divine power is everywhere about us; not so the evidence of Divine love. That love could only reveal itself to the human heart by some supreme act of human tenderness and devotion; the fact, or fancy, of Christ's cross and passion could alone supply such a revelation."¹¹

When Mrs. Miller says that Browning's decision caused reason to be "dethroned and degraded," she makes clear that she places reason above intuition. Of course, if one a priori "identifies truth with what is actually present to the senses"¹² as the positivist does, if one demands that one measure all his beliefs by the empirically provable, it is useless to argue the point. All one can do is to say that there are many others like Browning who do trust their intuition as much as they trust reason. There are those who believe that

religious truths depend wholly on religious intuitions. In other words, our appeal must be only to basic human intuitions, not to any "facts."¹³

Browning's decision that one can not reason the existence of God reflects a point of view that is held by many modern theologians. Soren Kierkegaard declares,

Generally speaking, it is a difficult matter to prove that anything exists; and what is still worse for the intrepid

¹¹Quoted by William O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning (Toronto, 1950), p. 39.

¹²Emil Brunner, Truth as Encounter, trans. Amandus W. Loos, David Cairns, and T. H. L. Parker (Philadelphia, [1964]), p. 9.

¹³W. T. Stace, Time and Eternity (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), p. 156.

souls who undertake the venture, the difficulty is such that fame scarcely awaits those who concern themselves with it. The entire demonstration always turns into something very different and becomes an additional development of the consequences that flow from my having assumed that the object in question exists. Thus I always reason from existence, not toward existence, whether I move in the sphere of palpable sensible fact or in the realm of thought As long as I keep my hold on the proof, i.e., continue to demonstrate, the existence does not come out, if for no other reason than that I am engaged in proving it; but when I let the proof go, the existence is there.¹⁴

Kierkegaard contends that simply because one can not reason the existence of God is not proof that he does not exist. Browning accepted the belief that the existence of God could not be reasoned, but, at the same time, he also agreed that "the existence is there." Browning's belief was much like that of W. T. Stace who said,

It is not the case that God, . . . the God of love, cannot be apprehended at all. He cannot be apprehended by concept. This is the very meaning of the "incomprehensibility" of God But he does reveal Himself to man . . . in that form of human consciousness which, for lack of a better term, we have called intuition.¹⁵

Mrs. Miller's error is the error of attempting to impose her intellectual position on Browning. She seems to claim, as Brunner says the positivist claims, that

we have passed from the childish era of religion and myth, and the adolescent era of metaphysic and speculation, into the adult era of the positive sciences. (A. Comte) Thus it comes to the identification of truth and scientific

¹⁴Soren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton, New Jersey, 1962), pp. 49, 52.

¹⁵Stace, p. 65.

knowledge as knowledge of what is actually present to the senses.¹⁶

Brunner points out that the "peculiarity" of this sort of view

is not that it considers man, like every other entity as an object given to the senses but, rather, that it believes itself able to grasp man in his totality thus, as an object. Its epistemological error is that it does not recognize the limits of this conception of man.

There is no doubt that the decision which Browning made was an important one for him, but Mrs. Miller's view of the effects of the decision can not be supported. First, although Mrs. Miller disagrees that one ought to rely on intuition, she does not succeed in proving either that Browning's decision to subordinate reason was the result of his mother's influence or that such a decision would necessarily have psychological repercussions. Moreover, Mrs. Miller's contention that Browning was so ashamed of his decision that he adopted an obscurity to guard against making others aware that he had "degraded and dethroned reason" cannot stand, for many of Browning's clearest poems, "Saul," "Cleon," "Epistle of Karshish," "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day," present the very religious position which Mrs. Miller says he was attempting to hide.

Furthermore, as Mrs. Miller recognizes, Browning's rejection of Shelley's atheism came before Pauline, which is an open, soul-baring record of the change. In this work Browning provides a

¹⁶Brunner, p. 9.

brief sketch of the change as the result of a conscious intellectual history:

First went my hopes of perfecting mankind,
Next--faith in them, and then in freedom's self
And virtue's self, then my own motives, ends
And aims and loves, and human love went last.

And even though there are complaints of obscurity in Pauline, it is a matter of abundant record that Browning's decision to conceal his personal emotions in the personae of dramatic form came after Pauline in which his rejection of Shelley's position was openly confessed.

This is not to say that Mrs. Miller has not written an interesting biography. She presents a side of Browning that is very different from the traditional view and throws light on his psychological history. However, in her attempt to be iconoclastic she often overstates her case. Moreover, she fails to document much of her material which, taken out of context, sometimes appears to be more damaging than it really is.

Approaching the problem in a somewhat different way, Francis Duckworth bases his discussion and explanation of Browning's obscurity on three areas of conflict which he claims can be found in Browning. The first area of conflict has to do with Browning's personality:

There are first the inconsistencies in the outward man--the philosophic poet who dressed like a prosperous solicitor and frequented the tables of the great. Then there are the inconsistencies in his attitude (so far as they found expression in conduct) toward poetry in general and his own poetry in

particular. A talkative, frank, courageous man, he was not averse from discussing other men's poetry, but he shrank from talking about his own.¹⁷

That Browning was not Bohemian in his dress can hardly be considered an inconsistency. There are scores of poets and philosophers who look like ordinary businessmen as Browning did. T. S. Eliot surely looked as much like a publisher and Robert Frost certainly looked as much like a farmer as they did poets. Certainly Duckworth does not expect poets to fit the stereotype:

Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.¹⁸

As to the second inconsistency which Duckworth sees, for a poet to dislike talking about his own work yet delight in the work of others does not seem unnatural. Eliot's comment that after a poet has written his poem he can say to it, "Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book--and don't expect me to take any further interest in you," has already been quoted and that Browning had a similar attitude toward his own poetry has already been suggested. Since the poet is primarily concerned with putting experience into language, after the poem is written he has finished his part in the

¹⁷Duckworth, p. 145.

¹⁸Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," The Poetical and Dramatic Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York, 1834), VII, 214.

poetic process, and then the poem becomes the means by which an experience can be recreated for the reader. Possibly Browning realized that although he might be the author of a poem, interpretations other than his own were also valid. Eliot states that

the meaning of a poem as a whole . . . is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning is what the poem means to different sensitive readers.¹⁹

This would account for the fact that when Browning was asked specific intelligent questions about his poetry, he was willing to answer them, but at the same time, did not correct Mrs. Orr, J. T. Nettleship and others who interpreted his poems in ways other than that which he intended when he wrote them. On the other hand, he could approach the works of other men on the same level as any other reader and could examine that poetry and discuss what it meant to him without assuming the position of the poet dictating the meaning of his own work.

These two traits of Browning's character, taken alone, seem hardly significant enough to be revelations of a deep seated conflict within the poet, but Duckworth presents as further evidence examples of what he considers to be inconsistency in the way Browning deals with certain ideas in his poetry. Needless to say, Duckworth, although he denies that he is doing so, virtually ignores the fact that Browning is writing poetry. If what has been shown so far about the nature of Browning's poetry has any validity at all, one must

¹⁹Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," p. 126.

remember that the poet is attempting to embody a particular experience, or perhaps a character, in language, and that when he uses language, he is doing so in a poetic way. Duckworth, however, approaches the poetry in the same way as did the nineteenth-century critics. Duckworth is concerned about what Browning is "saying," what Browning "means." He therefore assumes that when Browning seems to contradict himself, he is guilty of an intellectual failure which requires psychological explanation. But Kenneth Burke points out,

for the validity of "poetic" meanings, I should suggest that the "test" cannot be a formal one, as with the diagrams for testing a syllogism. Poetic characterizations do not categorically exclude each other in the either-true-or-false sense any more than the characterizations "honest" or "tall" could categorically exclude the characterizations "learned," "unlearned," or "thin."²⁰

Duckworth sees as contradictory certain of Browning's statements about time and eternity. First, he selects passages from several poems, in which Browning speaks of the "eternal moment." From "By the Fireside" he cites

Oh moment, one and infinite!
The water slips o'er stock and stone;
The West is tender, hardly bright:
How grey at once is the evening grown-
One star, its chrysolite!²¹

And from "The Last Ride Together," he selects

²⁰Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, Revised and Abridged (New York, 1957), pp. 126-127.

²¹Quoted by Duckworth, p. 155.

What if we still ride on, we two
 With life for ever old yet new,
 Changed not in kind but in degree,
 The instant made eternity,-
 And heaven just prove that I and she
 Ride, ride together, for ever ride?²²

Then from other poems he chooses passages in which Browning stresses the idea of striving through the present life and continuing to strive through other lives. For example, from "The Last Ride Together," he cites,

Had fate
 Proposed bliss here should sublimate
 My being-had I signed the bond-
 Still one must lead some life beyond,
 Have a bliss to die with, dim-described.²³

And in "Christina" Browning writes,

Ages past the soul existed,
 Here an age 'tis resting merely,
 And hence fleets again for ages . . .²⁴

Of course there are many other poems in which Browning deals with both ideas. Of the two concepts, Duckworth says,

The idea of an endless series of existences leading from one degree of achievement to another implies a particular conception of the objective reality of time succession. Now, anyone who thinks of time as something possessing an objective reality cannot attach any meaning to the phrase, "The instant made eternity." On the other hand, "The instant made eternity" enables a man within the cramped limits of however short and imperfect an existence to realise his gain, to enjoy his

²²Quoted by Duckworth, p. 153.

²³Quoted by Duckworth, p. 153.

²⁴Quoted by Duckworth, p. 151.

reward. There is a contradiction here. To put it vulgarly, you cannot have it both ways.²⁵

Now even if one forgets for a moment that Duckworth is dealing with poetry, his argument will still not stand because what he has pointed out is, in fact, not necessarily a contradiction. One can both "think of time as something possessing an objective reality," and at the same time, accept the idea of "The instant made eternity." W. T. Stace in his book Time and Eternity declares,

The eternal moment, being a point of intersection, can be looked at either from within or from without. Since it belongs to both orders, it is both temporal and eternal. Looked at internally--that is as the mystic himself sees it in that moment--it is infinite and eternal. Looked at from the outside--as it is seen, not only by all of us in our normal consciousness, but by the mystic himself when he has passed out of it into the time-order, and looks back upon it in memory--looked at thus externally it is a moment in time.²⁶

Therefore, perhaps Duckworth is wrong in saying "you can't have it both ways." Mystic conceptions of the universe can and do have it both ways, and since Duckworth attempts to show that Browning was in many ways a mystic, he must admit that Browning can also have it both ways.

Nevertheless, these "inconsistencies and anomalies" which Duckworth sees in Browning, and which seem at this point to be rather tenuous, are evidence in Duckworth's opinion of "a deep seated conflict in his mind." The conflict arises, says Duckworth, from

²⁵Duckworth, pp. 153-154.

²⁶Stace, p. 76.

"warring elements" which "could be described as either the poet and the bourgeois, or as the mystic and the poet of action."²⁷ Browning wanted to present in his poetry

the white light [which] is the absolute truth or the whole of truth, and that again is something which, as a philosopher would say, unifies or co-ordinates, or is a synthesis of, our whole experience The poet relies on intuition and on visions Or, to use a different metaphor, he has heaven opened to him in a vision. How far he succeeds in making us also see that vision depends upon two things--the adequacy of his medium and the distinctness and clarity of his own seeing eye. And so far as Browning has in any instance or in any degree failed, it has been usual to attribute failure to the inadequacy of his medium--that is, of human language. It is not impossible, however, that he did not always manage to see very clearly what it was he desired to convey. And that may have been, as he himself hints, because he could not endure to face the central incandescence of that revelation. Certainly he desired to see, and to make others see, the world irradiated with that light--the light that shone within him.²⁸

In other words, the mystic "was eager to rise to those regions of vision, but the poet of action pulled him back."²⁹

There are several difficulties involved in Duckworth's analysis of this "conflict" within Browning. First, the evidence which he presents to support his contention of "inconsistencies and anomalies" in Browning's character are not at all conclusive. Secondly, Duckworth's explanation for the alleged conflict seems almost contradictory. He says that what Browning "desired to convey" was an

²⁷Duckworth, p. 209.

²⁸Duckworth, pp. 193-194.

²⁹Duckworth, p. 210.

incandescence which Browning himself "could not endure to face." Then when Duckworth gets to the basic difficulty, that is, why Browning was afraid of the "white light" in the first place, he says only that there were "certain inhibitions . . . at work here." But Duckworth does not know what "inhibitions." He says,

To the question--of what nature was the inhibition from which Browning suffered, no satisfactory answer can be suggested by the present writer. He will travel thus far with the psychoanalysts as to say that there were powerful forces at work in the man which never succeeded in finding their appropriate outlet.³⁰

Although Duckworth does not know what the inhibitions were, or why Browning could not "endure" the "white light," he claims that conflict within Browning "produced definite physical repercussions--a physical restlessness, headaches, neuralgia--which he tried to cure by vigorous exercise."³¹ Even if the evidence of conflict were more conclusive, Duckworth errs in expecting from Browning, the poet, too much of what the nineteenth-century middle class expected from their poet prophets. It seems rather naive to expect any poet to present "the absolute truth or the whole of truth." Certainly Browning never deceived himself into believing that he might know "the whole truth," or that any human being could have that sort of knowledge.

Like Duckworth and Miller, Stewart W. Holmes in "Browning: Semantic Stutterer" contends that Browning's obscurity had its

³⁰Duckworth, pp. 208-209.

³¹Duckworth, p. 211.

origin in the psychology of the poet. But Holmes sees the difficulty not as a problem in communication itself, but rather as confusion in Browning's own mind about what he intended when he used certain metaphysical terms. The possibility that Holmes' analysis might become an unquestioned staple of Browning criticism is suggested by a casual reference of W. C. DeVane's in his Browning Handbook. Browning, says DeVane,

had also to face the problems of communication, methods and means, form and language. In dealing with abstractions he was a "semantic stutterer," and we see him through Sordello working partially and temporarily perhaps, his cure.³²

In some sixteen separate passages, Holmes cites one hundred lines from Sordello, five from La Saisiaz, and eleven from Parleyings as the primary basis of his analysis establishing that Browning's use of the words "soul," "mind," "body," "perception," and "consciousness" is not clear or logically consistent. Holmes believes that Browning's inconsistency is evidence of his "inability to express himself clearly about what we may call metaphysical matters."³³

Holmes' analysis of Browning's use of these terms is based on the theory of General Semantics and, in particular, a work by Wendell Johnson called Language and Speech Hygiene: An Application of General Semantics.³⁴ The idea of General Semantics was originally

³²William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955), p. 16.

³³Holmes, 231.

³⁴Wendell Johnson, Language and Speech Hygiene: An Application of General Semantics (Chicago, 1939).

set forth by Alfred Korzybski in Science and Sanity, first published in 1933,³⁵ and it has been perpetuated primarily by Wendell Johnson, S. I. Hayakawa, and Stuart Chase.

Before examining what Holmes says about Browning, it will be helpful first to summarize briefly the basic ideas of General Semantics presented in Johnson's work. The General Semanticist contends that there are many levels of reality but that most people are aware of only the Macroscopic Level, or the world of objects perceivable by the senses. However, there are levels of reality beneath this level of sense perception of which the common man is not always aware. There are the Microscopic Level, the reality of which one is aware when he uses "extra neural" paraphanelia like the microscope and telescope, and the Sub-microscopic level, that level of reality that can not be seen even with the microscope. This is the level of electrons, protons, and neutrons, or the level of "dynamic process."³⁶ Therefore, when one looks at an apple, he does not see the whole truth about the object, and he "can not react adequately to the object (level 3) without knowing it in terms of level 2 and level 1."³⁷

³⁵Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity (Lakeville, Connecticut, 1933).

³⁶Johnson, p. 14.

³⁷Johnson, p. 18.

When one uses language, he is simply giving a label to the object. The word or statement is the fourth level, or the verbal level. The General Semanticist is eager to make clear that the word is not the object, that it simply "represents the object, etc., and it does so imperfectly." Whether or not a label is adequate is "measured . . . in terms of the proportion of n listeners who are able to pick out from several possible referents the one intended referent of the statement."³⁸

In his book, Johnson points out that

a label or descriptive statement can be the referent of another word or statement. That is, you can make a descriptive statement about something non-verbal, and then you can say something about that statement, and then you can make a third statement about your second statement, etc., etc. Thus, you can make a statement about a statement about a statement about a statement, ad infinitum, each succeeding one being farther removed from the macroscopic level (level No. 3) than the one preceding it. So far as level No. 4 is concerned, it represents any first-order label or description.³⁹

This process of making statements about statements and moving farther and farther away from the level of the sense-referent is called "abstraction."

Without this process of abstracting, says Johnson,

we could not have modern science with its extremely high order inferences, nor could we have higher mathematics, symbolic logic, and the blueprints that are such amazingly faithful abstracts of the skyscrapers and bridges that are built by means of them.⁴⁰

³⁸Johnson, pp. 24, 25.

³⁹Johnson, p. 25.

⁴⁰Johnson, p. 32.

However, there are those users of language who confuse the levels of abstraction, who

act as if knowing, say, a second order verbal abstract were the same as knowing the abstract (the first order description) from which it has been abstracted. Armed with their highly verbal "knowledge," they assume attitudes of authority, become dogmatic, and then become very indignant, disappointed, hurt, even paranoid when contradicted or challenged. Persistently asking such a person, "What do you mean?" is an almost sure-fire way to get him angry.⁴¹

This confusion of the levels of abstraction results in "varying degrees of muscular tension" and "a tendency to show 'undelayed' reactions, excessive impulsiveness, irritability, a tendency to 'fly off the handle,' 'jump to conclusions,' etc." and, most relevant here, often in stuttering and other physical disorders.⁴²

Holmes contends that when Browning was not clear in the use of his metaphysical terms, the lack of clarity resulted from the fact that Browning "confused the levels of abstractions and dealt with the thing-word relationship intensionally rather than extensionally." When he did so, Holmes declares, Browning became a "semantic stutterer."⁴³ It is this part of Holmes' argument which is of chief concern here, but it will be best to summarize the remainder of his argument before examining more closely the process by which Holmes labels Browning a "semantic stutterer."

⁴¹Johnson, p. 32.

⁴²Johnson, p. 37.

⁴³Holmes, 231.

Holmes states that semantic stuttering is caused by "semantic blockages," "obstructions in the nervous system which interfere with the healthy functioning of the process of evaluation and hence cause delusions." He contends that Browning suffered from these "semantic blockages" and that his headaches were one manifestation of them. Moreover, he states that it was Browning's uneven and "sketchy" education and his being sheltered and pampered as a young man which caused the "blockages which lurked in the young man's head," because these aspects of his early environment were "inimical to the development of 'intellectual power' and were likely to produce symptoms of semantic confusion."⁴⁴

Holmes' accusation that Browning suffered from semantic confusion is one thing, but when Holmes says the semantic blockages cause "delusions," the implication becomes much more serious. Holmes declares that "'normal' people do not have such delusions, such faith in their infallibility."⁴⁵ He speaks of there being "something . . . pathological--in this iteration . . . of his realization of verbal impotence."⁴⁶ Indeed, Holmes declares that "Browning . . . was a sick man."⁴⁷ But Holmes' inference that Browning was actually mentally ill is hardly acceptable. Even Holmes himself says in

⁴⁴Holmes, 247-250.

⁴⁵Holmes, 244.

⁴⁶Holmes, 234.

⁴⁷Holmes, 252.

another article that Browning

calls his readers to live life fully, and gives them a pattern which, discovered through superior insight and experience, he has proved successful in his own life.⁴⁸

Surely Holmes is not speaking here of a "sick man."

Nevertheless, Holmes declares that Browning managed to cure himself only when he

turned from autobiographic, metaphysical probings to a new medium, non-personal dramatic lyrics. This meant that from intensional he turned to extensional language . . . the word-thing relationship changed for the better since the words usually refer to "sense" objects.⁴⁹

This took place, says Holmes, after Browning had written Sordello and had decided to develop the dramatic monologue. Of course, contrary to Holmes' theory, Browning did not forsake the metaphysical in his later poetry, but Holmes merely evades this objection by saying, "It is true that some of his later work is in the analytical style. The reasons for that are not within the purview of this paper."⁵⁰

In addition to these weaknesses in the latter part of Holmes' argument, there are serious difficulties in Holmes' original contention that Browning is a "semantic stutterer." For example, when Holmes begins his discussion, he seems to be simply drawing

⁴⁸Stewart Holmes, "Browning's 'Sordello' and Jung," PMLA, LVI (1941), 792.

⁴⁹Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 254.

⁵⁰Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 255.

an analogy between the sort of stuttering with which Johnson deals and a kind of confusion which he sees in Browning's poetry. He says that there are "symptoms" in Browning which "correspond to the symptoms of clinically observed stutterers."⁵¹ But he gradually shifts from a simple analogy to the identification of Browning's confusion with stuttering itself when he says of Browning's metaphysical poems, "all these poems are to some degree stutterings."⁵² Finally he says that even Browning "himself recognized that he was a semantic stutterer"⁵³ Holmes leaps from the position that Browning was like a stutterer to the position that Browning was a stutterer. The shift is a subtle one, and Holmes apparently tries to justify it by broadening the definition of stuttering. He says, "The word 'stuttering' refers clinically to a great variety of phenomena" and he cites Johnson's work for support.⁵⁴ It is true that Johnson indicates that "stuttering" can refer to many speech phenomena, but always Johnson means actual speech behavior, when a person's lips and tongue do not work together so that speech is rhythmical. But Holmes defines the term "stuttering" as "the inability of an adult to express himself with

⁵¹Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 231.

⁵²Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 233.

⁵³Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 233.

⁵⁴Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 242.

average articulateness."⁵⁵ Holmes does not mean a difficulty in the physical activity of speech, but an inability to put thoughts clearly into written language, and Johnson's research provides no basis whatever for this application of General Semantics.

Holmes has broadened the definition of "stuttering" to such an extent that it becomes useless. If one were to apply Holmes' definition, all those who may fail in communication because of ignorance, of lack of vocabulary or because of stupidity, and all foreigners unfamiliar with a new language would necessarily be included under his definition of stutterers. The definition is too general for any specific application and any effort to restrict it will destroy Holmes' house of cards.

In addition to Holmes' modification of Johnson's definition of stutterers, there are other difficulties in Holmes' use of the theory of General Semantics to show that Browning was a "semantic stutterer." First, when Johnson deals with stuttering, he is dealing with a cause-effect relationship. Semantic confusion causes a disturbance in the communicative process. This disturbance follows and is not identical with its cause. Even if Holmes has discovered a confusion and an indefiniteness in Browning's use of certain metaphysical concepts which may be considered comparable to the semantic confusion which was the cause of the stuttering in the children with whom Johnson worked, he still has not identified a result that is

⁵⁵Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 242.

comparable to physical stuttering in Johnson's children. He has not attempted to identify any obscurity in Browning which is separate from this inexact use of terms. He has not shown any trait of style, either in diction, rhythm, syntax, or otherwise, that results from the semantic confusion. Indeed, he seems to assume that the words in question express directly and reliably the condition of Browning's thought on the concepts which they represent. Holmes suggests a condition comparable to the proposed cause of stuttering; he does not establish a condition comparable to stuttering. He may appear to have done so only because of his arbitrary definition of stuttering.

Following the General Semanticist, Holmes speaks more than once of the cause of Browning's obscurity as resting upon a confusion of levels of abstractions. Browning "confused the levels of abstractions and dealt with the thing-word relationship intensionally rather than extensionally."⁵⁶ Holmes declares, "The poet violated the rules of evaluation by confusing the levels of abstraction."⁵⁷ However, in his analysis Holmes makes no effort to analyze the words concerned as representing different levels of abstraction. In the summary of the theory of General Semantics, it was pointed out that abstractions are statements about statements about objects. In other words, abstraction is made from the object, the sense-referent. If there is any confusion in the use of a term,

⁵⁶Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 231.

⁵⁷Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 255.

then, one need only refer back to the sense-referent to clear up the difficulty. Because Browning did not refer back to the object, Holmes contends that he confused the levels of abstraction. Holmes says,

Browning tried to illuminate the meaning of his key words not by reference to level 1, . . . things and facts, but by reference to levels 3, 4, 5, etc., to other words and by means of verbal gymnastics.⁵⁸

Now when one is talking about apples, one can easily refer to the object itself if there is confusion about what the term "apple" means, but to demand that Browning refer to "things and facts" when he uses words like "soul" and "consciousness" seems ridiculous, for there are no objects to which one can point and say, "That is the object to which I am referring when I say 'soul.'" In fact, even Holmes, while he is condemning Browning for not referring to the object, admits that there are no such objects in the first place. Holmes says,

It must be admitted that in dealing with problems of a non-sense, metaphysical nature, he could not make sure that his words always referred to something perceptible by our few senses.⁵⁹

Instead of explaining how Browning could possibly clarify his terms, Holmes only exclaims, "What can we say coherently of incoherence?"⁶⁰ In fact, he seems to admit there is no possibility of avoiding confusion when using metaphysical terms. He says, "We

⁵⁸Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 245-246.

⁵⁹Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 246.

⁶⁰Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 245.

shall study the poet's use of these words, realizing always that we can never know exactly what he meant by them."⁶¹

Clearly what Holmes criticizes in Browning and what he sees as the cause of obscurity in Browning is really something other than semantic confusion. What he criticizes is the poet's dealing with metaphysical subjects at all. Holmes contends that Browning's condition improved when he turned to poetry other than the metaphysical and when "the word-thing relationship changed for the better since the words usually refer to 'sense' objects."⁶² If the implications of his arguments are consistently applied, the necessary conclusion is that all writing on metaphysics must result in what he calls "semantic stuttering."

Clearly Holmes' article is not adequate to explain the difficulties in Browning. Holmes claims that Browning's confusion in the use of five words is enough proof to show that in Sordello Browning exhibits "the inability of an adult to express himself with average articulateness." At the same time, he makes no effort at all to deal with the difficulties of those parts of Sordello which are not concerned with metaphysical questions, and there seems to be really no special difference between the difficulty of reading a passage dealing with a metaphysical problem and a

⁶¹Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 237.

⁶²Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 254.

passage which is pure narrative as the following:

Who will, may hear Sordello's story told:
His story? Who believes me shall behold
The man, pursue his fortunes to the end,
Like me: for as the friendless-people's friend
Spied from his hill-top once, despite the din
And dust of multitudes, Pentapoli
Names o' the Nakes Arm, I single out
Sordello, compassed murkily about
With ravage of six long sad hundred years.
Only believe me. Ye believe?

Appears

Verona . . . Never, I should warn you first
Of my own choice had this, if not the worst
Yet not the best expedient, served to tell
A story I could body forth so well
By making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him.
Since, though I might be proud to see the dim
Abyssal past divide its hateful surge,
Letting of all men this one man emerge,
Because it pleased me, yet, that moment past,
I should delight in watching first to last
His progress as you watch it, not a whit
More in the secret than yourselves who sit
Fresh-chapleted to listen.⁶³

In addition to the weaknesses in Holmes' argument, there is a certain tone which pervades the article that indicates that Holmes is not being entirely fair in his judgment of Browning. He implies that Browning tried to deceive his readers, and he claims there is "evidence of Browning's rationalizing his guilty conviction of his linguistic confusion into a lordly disdain for those who hinted at it." He continues, "A suggestion of literary unscrupulousness--with a reason supplied and a rejection of

⁶³Browning, Works, p. 75.

external, social standards appear in an early part of Sordello (Book II)."⁶⁴ The obvious inference is that Browning himself is guilty of "literary unscrupulousness" simply because he presents a character who is guilty. Likewise, Holmes says, "Browning is the poet laureate of rationalizers; witness his Franceschinis, his Eloughrams, his deLorges."⁶⁵ The verdict of guilty by association which Holmes proclaims is not restricted to Browning. Holmes also implies that anyone who thinks he understands Browning's metaphysical poetry is "suffering from the same delusions" as Browning. In a footnote Holmes says,

Two people with "delirium tremens" who both see pink snakes on the wall will agree that each is right (i.e., that each makes sense) when he says "I see pink snakes on the wall." Doubtless there are many people who believe they know exactly what Browning means when he dons the robes of metaphysician and starts talking about "soul" and "mind" and "body," about "Power," and "power," etc.⁶⁶

Not for one moment does Holmes grant that Browning's position might be legitimate, and anyone who does think Browning makes sense has already been judged.

When one examines the carelessness which is evident in Holmes' argument, the restriction of his discussion to metaphysical language, and the over-all tone of his article, one must conclude that the

⁶⁴Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 235.

⁶⁵Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 236.

⁶⁶Holmes, "Semantic Stutterer," 249.

argument cannot stand. Certainly Browning expressed himself with more than average articulateness about the very difficult ideas with which he was dealing. He wrote to Elizabeth,

Of course an artist's whole problem must be, as Carlyle wrote to me, "the expressing with articulate clearness the thought in him"--I am almost inclined to say that clear expression should be his only work and care--for he is born, ordained, such as he is--and not born learned in putting what was born in him into words--whatever can be clearly spoken, ought to be. But "bricks and mortar" is very easily said--and some of the thoughts in "Sordello" not so readily even if Miss Mitford were to try her hand on them.⁶⁷

The best that can be said about Holmes' analysis of obscurity in Browning is that he has essentially invented a new critical term and that to some readers it may seem to communicate "intensionally" a feeling they have in reading parts of Browning.

Miller, Duckworth, and Holmes use the same evidence to support their respective positions. But the fact that a poet does not like to discuss his own poetry, that he uses terms poetically, and that he likes to dress in an inconspicuous, ordinary way, is surely not indicative of a disturbed personality. Even Browning's headaches were far more likely the result of his poor eyesight than of a psychological problem. W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin note that Browning's eyesight weakened as a result of the vegetarian diet which he adopted for a short while in his youth.⁶⁸ Moreover,

⁶⁷Letters, I, 454.

⁶⁸W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning, With Notices of His Writings, His Family, and His Friends, (Hamden, Connecticut, 1906), p. 51.

the familiar sketch of Browning reading The Ring and the Book drawn by William Story clearly shows a man suffering from poor vision.⁶⁹

The studies by Miller, Duckworth, and Holmes are provocative, and they do raise interesting questions about Browning's personality and his work, but the premises on which these critics base their arguments have very little significance unless one has already presupposed that Browning is abnormally unintelligible. However, there have been no attempts by twentieth century critics to show that Browning goes beyond the limits of obscurity allowed in twentieth century poetry, or even to show if there are such limits. Therefore, in spite of the lengths to which these three critics have gone to account for Browning's unintelligibility, they have failed to determine if there is really a need for such studies in the first place.

⁶⁹In Browning to His American Friends: Letters Between the Brownings, the Storys and James Russell Lowell, 1841-1890, ed. Gertrude Reese Hudson (New York, 1965), between pp. 135-137.

CHAPTER IV

"FRA LIPPO LIPPI": THE DEMAND ON THE READER

The central thesis of this study is that those characteristics of Browning's poetry which were condemned as "obscurity" by many nineteenth century critics and which have prompted modern critics to write psychological studies to explain them result, in fact, from demands made upon the reader which are thoroughly compatible with the practice and theory of modern poetry. Accordingly, a typical Browning poem will be examined in such a way as to indicate the nature of the demands made upon the reader. This exercise will serve to show the sort of confusion and interruption of communication which can occur for the inattentive reader, and although the kinds of misreading which might occur cannot be predicted and so cannot be submitted to objective study, some attention can be given to the obstacles which might be expected to arise from the preconceptions of many Victorian readers, as discussed earlier.

Two precautions are necessary in connection with the following study. The reader who is thoroughly familiar with Browning's poetry will find it difficult to recapture the quality of his reading experience upon first being introduced to Browning. To the initiated Browning seems thoroughly clear, his poems all of a piece and intact, and this fact supports the general thesis. The second precaution concerns the limitations of the proposed study. No effort will be made at a complete explication of the poem, and problems of interpretation will be mentioned only in so far as they seem to relate to

the special demands which Browning's poetry makes upon the reader.

The discussion will be restricted to one poem which is generally considered to be representative both in form and content of Browning's work. "Fra Lippo Lippi" has been selected because it is a dramatic monologue, the Italian setting and the time of action are typical of Browning, and the poem deals with Browning's favorite topics, art and faith. The complete poem will be included in the text of the analysis so that references to the poem will be clear.¹

The title of "Fra Lippo Lippi" presents the poem's first demand upon the reader. In 1855 when Browning published the Men and Women volume which contained the poem, the name of Fra Lippo Lippi was virtually unknown to Victorian England. The first complete English translation of Vasari's Lives of the Artists had appeared only five years before in 1850,² and apparently the volume was not widely known. John Ruskin, whom one would expect to be especially familiar with such matters, said that when he published the third volume of Modern Painters in 1856, the year after Browning's work, he knew nothing of the painter.³ Even today, unless the reader is

¹Browning, Works, pp. 342-345. Hereafter line numbers will be indicated in the text.

²Betty Borroughs, "Foreword," Vasari's Lives of the Artists, ed. Betty Borroughs (New York, 1964), p. xix.

³Works of Ruskin, V, 87, n. 1.

well educated in art history when he is first introduced to the poem, he will probably not be able to identify Lippo as a Renaissance artist. This lack of knowledge about Lippo makes the oblique references to painting in lines 25-26 and 31-36 almost impossible to understand until line 39 when Lippo clearly identifies himself as a painter. Possession of this knowledge would diminish the demands made upon the reader in the first twenty-eight lines of the poem. Moreover, understanding the significance of Lippo's style of painting would greatly aid the reader in understanding the implications of what Browning says about art and faith in the main body of the poem.

The first lines, "I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!/
You need not clap your torches to my face," immediately force the reader to use his imagination. He must visualize the intensity of Lippo's face, illuminated by the burning torches, against the background of the surrounding darkness. Into this concentrated but limited image Browning introduces relationships and circumstances concerning the yet not clearly identified actors:

Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!
What, 't is past midnight, and you go the rounds,
And here you catch me at an alley's end
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar? (ll. 3-6)

As Lippo's immediate surroundings are brought into focus, the reader must determine for himself to whom Lippo is speaking. He is not told who "go[es] the rounds." It might be a night watchman, a policeman, a doctor. Moreover, since "you" and "your" can be both

singular and plural, when Lippo speaks it is not immediately clear whether he is addressing one, two, or more. The reader must suspend his judgment temporarily, and through an accumulation of details given later in the poem, he can eventually, by careful attention, establish the identity of the listeners.

In the same few lines, the reader becomes aware that the monk has been apprehended outside a house of prostitution, and he begins to formulate certain expectations about what is to come in the poem. The Victorian reader might well have anticipated a scathing attack on the morality within the Catholic Church, especially if he were already familiar with Browning's earlier poem, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." And both the Victorian and the modern reader would probably be prepared for at least a harsh treatment of Lippo and a condemnation of his actions. One is not at all prepared for what actually occurs in the poem.

While the reader is being thrust into the dramatic situation, he must also cope with the vigorous movement of both syntax and thought as in the next few lines:

The Carmine's my cloister; hunt it up,
Do,--harry out, if you must show your zeal,
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company! (ll. 7-11)

The reader can not understand the passage until he reaches the word "mouse," for only then is the analogy with Lippo's situation made clear. The reader must be nimble enough to hold the entire construction

in his mind until he has all the information necessary for comprehension.

As Lippo continues to speak, there is a subtle shift in his attitude that the reader must be alert to catch. He is at first defensive, but he gradually becomes more confident as he says,

Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take
Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?
Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend
Three streets off--he's a certain . . . how d'ye call?
Master--a . . . Cosimo of the Medici,
I' the house that caps the corner. (ll. 12-18)

Lippo's mention of Cosimo of the Medici is calculated to intimidate those who have apprehended him. He knows the weight which the name carries, and he is using it to force his release. But the reader will not be aware of this subtlety if he does not know of the tremendous power and influence of the Medici family. Browning also expects the reader to recognize the family name in order to establish the place and time of the action of the monologue.

Because the dramatic monologue does not allow for a description of the dramatic action, Browning requires the reader to infer all action and all that the other characters say from one speaker's words. For example, when Lippo says, "Who am I?" the reader is expected to understand that the monk is answering a question which has been put to him. And when Lippo exclaims in lines 18-20, "Boh! you were best! Remember and tell me, the day you're hanged,/ How you affected such a gullet's-gripe!" the reader must determine that Lippo's use of the Medici name has served its purpose and that the hand on his neck has

been removed. The reader may also now add very important details--the "gullet's-gripe"--but it is necessary that his retention of the limited image of the first two lines must have survived his interest in the morally suspect circumstances of the friar.

As Browning begins to expand the picture which he is painting, the reader's attention is taxed once again to visualize an additional figure. Lippo says,

But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves
Pick up a manner nor discredit you:
Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets
And count fair prize what comes into their net? (ll. 21-24)

The passage says very little directly, and the reader must supply what Browning only implies. When Lippo says, "your knaves," the reader must assume that Lippo is now addressing the leader of those who have apprehended him. Browning does not explain directly what sort of "manner" that the "knaves" exhibit, but uses a metaphor in the next two lines to explain indirectly. However, the metaphor may not be clear for some readers because Browning uses the word "pilchards" which is perhaps a less familiar word than "fish" or "sardine" might be.

Abruptly changing the direction of the monologue, Lippo exclaims in lines 25-26, "He's Judas to a tittle, that man is!/ Just such a face!" Nothing has been said in the poem to this point to prepare the reader to understand these words as the statement of a painter showing interest in a possible subject for his art. If he does not yet know Lippo, he could easily construe that Lippo is only attacking

the man for the rough treatment which he has administered.

Lippo continues,

Why, sir, you make amends.
 Lord, I'm not angry! Bid your hangdogs go
 Drink out this quarter-florin to the health
 Of the munificent House that harbors me
 (And many more beside, lads! more beside!)
 And all's come square again. (ll. 26-31)

The tone of the monologue seems to change from Lippo's defensiveness in the first few lines to what is almost comradery with the captain, but it is difficult for the reader to be certain of Lippo's attitude at this point, for his gift of a quarter-florin might be either a sign of his generous nature or a bribe to insure that he will not be reported to the authorities. As the "knaves" draw some distance away and Lippo and the captain are left alone, the reader must again change the focus of Browning's picture.

When Lippo reveals the painter's interest a second time, the reader may more easily understand what he means, for Lippo's verbal description of his proposed picture of John the Baptist graphically reproduces a sort of painting common in the Renaissance:

I'd like his face--
 His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
 With the pike and lantern,--for the slave that holds
 John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair
 With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say)
 And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped! (ll. 31-36)

If the reader still does not recognize that the speaker of the monologue is an artist, Browning finally gives the information in the next few lines. Lippo says,

It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
 A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
 Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so. (ll. 37-39)

With line 39 the reader has an unquestionable basis for modifying conceptions formed in the first part of the poem, but such modification will occur effectively only if the reader is concentrating vigorously.

Since Lippo has just revealed himself as Fra Lippo Lippi, the painter, the reader may easily misunderstand Lippo when he says,

What, brother Lippo's doings, up and down,
 You know them and they take you? like enough!
 I saw the proper twinkle in your eye-- (ll. 40-42)

The reader's first impression may be that the "doings" to which Lippo refers are his works as a painter, but surely Lippo's romantic escapades are what cause the "proper twinkle" in the captain's eye. The rapport between the captain and Lippo is thus established and as Lippo attempts to explain his presence in the alley, the poem returns to the subject introduced at the beginning of the poem, Brother Lippo's interest in the importance of the flesh.

Because a reader expects events to occur chronologically, any variation from this simple order may cause the reader special difficulty. As Lippo reverts to the events of the early evening, the reader is asked to readjust himself to a new time sequence. Lippo says,

'Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.
 Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.
 Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up bands

To roam the town and sing out carnival,
 And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,
 A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
 And saints again. I could not paint all night--
 Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
 There came a hurry of feet and little feet,
 A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of song,--
Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?
Flower o' the thyme-- and so on. Round they went.
 Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter
 Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,--three slim shapes,
 And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood,
 That's all I'm made of! (ll. 43-61)

At this point, the reader's possible expectation of moral or sectarian satire must be modified somewhat. The tone with which Browning handles Lippo is neither comic nor disdainful; therefore, the reader must, if he can, suspend moral judgment of Lippo and take note of several details in the passage which help to establish Browning's attitude toward Lippo. First, Browning's reference to "carnival" indicates that the rest of the poem may very well be a celebration of flesh rather than a condemnation of it. Lippo's exclamation, "zooks, sir, flesh and blood" must be seen as referring both to the face which Lippo sees and to himself, for in that way the phrase acts not only as a defense of Lippo's actions, but also as a foreshadowing of Lippo's view that art should reproduce the "flesh and blood" which the eye sees.

The last half of line 61 presents a syntactical problem commonly found in Browning's work. Lippo says, "Into shreds it went," and the reader has no way of knowing what "it" is because

Browning has not specified the antecedent. Only when the reader has read several lines further in the poem can he know exactly what Browning is talking about. Unless the reader is accustomed to this sort of irregular sentence structure, he may have a great deal of difficulty. However, if he is patient, he will discover that "it" is

Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
All the bed-furniture--a dozen knots,
There was a ladder! (ll. 62-64)

The passage also presents another problem for the reader which may not hinder understanding but which may disrupt attention. Browning often leaves out important words of a sentence. For example, in this case Browning has omitted both subject and verb of the object "knots." The reader must understand that the subject of the sentence is "I" and the verb is "tied."

Lippo continues,

Down I let myself
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,
And after them. I came up with the fun
Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met,--
(ll. 64-67)

If the reader still has not surmised that the setting of the poem is Florence, he will not recognize the reference to Saint Lorenzo Church. Certainly, many Victorians would not have known about the existence of the Florentine church, and at best might not have recognized the anglicized name of the church. Browning's mention of this particular church is significant, however, because Saint Laurence represents,

for Lippo, the hardy, outspoken sort that Lippo admires.

Flower o' the rose,
If I've been merry, what matter who knows?
 And so as I was stealing back again
 To get to bed and have a bit of sleep
 Ere I rise up tomorrow and go work
 On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast
 With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,
 You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
 Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head--
 Mine's shaved--a monk, you say--the sting's in that!
 If Master Cosimo announced himself,
 Mhm's the word naturally; but a monk! (ll. 68-79)

In this passage a new demand begins to be made upon the reader, a demand especially burdensome under Victorian preconceptions. The reader may have given up his expectation of religious and moral satire and accepted a sensual painter being treated lightly. But now in the almost loving words about the ascetic Saint Jerome, the reader is required to recognize and assimilate new depths and an unexpected range of sympathy in Fra Lippo. The corresponding adaptation of the reader's sympathy is essential, for Browning begins here an important and subtle theme involving the fact that Lippo himself has not solved the problem of the conflict between the demands of the church and the desires of the flesh. If one is aware of this conflict, Lippo's direct statement, "a monk, you say--the sting's in that!" takes on added significance, and, in fact, can be seen as a summation of the conflict within him.

As Lippo attempts to justify his attitude toward the flesh, he makes an abrupt movement back in time to his childhood. With each

such movement in time, the chances of the reader's being confused are increased. However, at this point the syntax is more regular than usual, and the reader may be able to follow the narrative with little trouble. Lippo cries,

Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!
 I was a baby when my mother died
 And father died and left me in the street.
 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds, and shucks,
 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
 My stomach being empty as your hat,
 The wind doubled me up and down I went.
 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew) (ll. 80-89)

The colloquial nature of Lippo's conversation may cause the reader momentary confusion. When Lippo says his stomach was as "empty as your hat," the reader's attention is directed to verbal oddities as part of the experience of a more general intellectual effort. Similarly, when he says that Aunt Lapaccia's hand is a "stinger," the reader must infer that Lippo as a child had occasion to feel the sting of his aunt's hand when he needed correction. Browning could have been more direct in conveying the same information, but the spirit and tone of the monologue would have been sacrificed.

The fact that Browning sometimes omits important words has already been pointed out, and this characteristic is quite evident when Lippo says,

And so along the wall, over the bridge,
 By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
 While I stood munching my first bread that month: (ll. 90-92)

Neither of these two sentences has a subject or verb. The first is made up entirely of prepositional phrases, and the reader must supply the missing "we went." The second sentence has an object, "six words," but not only does the reader not know what the six words are, he does not know who says them. It might be Lippo, Aunt Lapaccia, or even the "good fat father" mentioned in the next line. The reader can assume only that the words somehow concern the abrupt nature of Lippo's entry into the convent. In this single instance in this poem Browning may perhaps be justly accused of carelessness. But this acknowledgement would seem to strengthen the present argument. The Victorian critics who called Men and Women obscure suggest that Browning's "obscurity" results from carelessness in perversity. In fact, this single point creates no real difficulty in reading of the poem, for no one is tempted to count the words in the brief conversation:

"So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father,
 Wiping his own mouth, 't was refection-time,--
 "To quit this very miserable world?
 Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I;
 By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
 I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
 Palace, farm, villa, shop, and banking-house,
 Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
 Have given their hearts to--all at eight years old. (ll. 93-101)

There is considerable irony concealed in the passage, but irony is, of course, indirect expression and requires a measure of reader participation. When the "good fat father" says "this very miserable world," he means something quite different from what the hungry

child understands. For the child the world has been miserable not because the flesh has hindered spirituality, but because the demands of the flesh have not been met. Because Lippo respects the physical, material aspects of existence, he also uses the word "trash" ironically. He was eight years old when he "renounced" the world in order to fill his stomach, but he has never really rejected any aspect of the physical world.

The next few lines reveal that Lippo's entry into the convent involved more than he was first aware of:

Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
 'T was not for nothing--the good bellyful,
 The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
 And the day-long blessed idleness beside!
 "Let's see what the urchin's fit for"--that came next.
 Not overmuch their way, I must confess. (ll. 102-107)

Since the reader is not told who says, "Let's see what the urchin's fit for," he must assume that the monks desire to make their new addition productive. The line, "Not overmuch their way," may seem ambiguous. For example, Lippo might mean that the actions of the monks in his situation were quite unusual, he might mean that the monks were not overly generous, or he might mean that they were not overly demanding in what they asked of him. The reader must decide the meaning of the passage in light of what goes before and after.

The monks made

Such a to-do! They tried me with their books;
 Lord, they'd have taught me Latin in pure waste!
Flower o' the clove,
All the Latin I construe is "amo," I love!

But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
 Eight years together, as my fortune was,
 Watching folk's faces to know who will fling
 The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
 And who will curse or kick him for his pains---
 Which gentleman processional and fine,
 Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
 Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
 The droppings of the wax to sell again,
 Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,--
 How say I?--nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
 His bone from the heap of offal in the street,--
 (ll. 108-123)

The problem of time enters the poem again, for Lippo's description of his youth is a flashback within a flashback. He is attempting to show how his early youth affected his actions later inside the convent. In addition, as in the case of the allusions to the Medici and to Saint Lorenzo Church, Browning's reference to the "Eight" will probably seem obscure for most readers. Only a person very familiar with the Renaissance, and with Florence in particular, would know that Florence was ruled during that time by a council of men, the gonfaloniere di giustizia.⁴ The abrupt "How say I?" may also be confusing because Browning has once again left out important words which might help to clarify what he means. Actually, he intends these three words to be a shortened version of "How shall I say it?" for Lippo is attempting to make the captain understand how life was for him as a starving boy. Lippo declares,

Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
 He learns the look of things, and none the less

⁴"Florence," Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1965), IX, 464.

For admonition from the hunger-pinch.
 I had a store of such remarks, be sure,
 Which, after I found leisure, turned to use. (ll. 124-128)

In order to understand fully what Lippo is saying, the reader must recognize that the word "remarks" has more than one meaning. Because the word often means some verbal comment, the reader might construe that the word refers to "admonition" made by the "hunger-pinch"; however, since the word "remarks" can also mean perceptions or observations, the word probably refers to the observations of "folk's faces" which Lippo has just been describing. These close observations of faces are put to use in drawing, for Lippo says,

I drew men's faces on my copy-books,
 Scrawled them within the antiphonary's marge,
 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
 Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,
 And made a string of pictures of the world
 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
 On the wall, the bench, the door. (ll. 129-135).

If the reader does not know what an antiphonary is, Browning's reference to "long music-notes" will probably explain adequately that the word means a kind of song book. But even after one has this information, the visual image which Browning presents is quite concentrated and the reader must follow Browning carefully and attentively in order to grasp its intricate details.

Lippo's drawings are evidently not greatly admired, for he says,

The monks looked black.
 "May," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?
 In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.

What if at last we get our man of parts,
 We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese
 And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
 And put the front on it that ought to be!"
 And hereupon he bade me daub away. (ll. 135-142)

The reader must note that the Prior is the one who refuses to turn Lippo out and he is also the one who encourages Lippo to paint the walls of the convent. The Prior's change in attitude later in the poem will be more significant if the reader is aware of his role in getting Lippo to paint originally.

Browning refers in lines 139-140 to the Carmelites, Camaldolese, and Preaching Friars without explanation and requires the reader to recognize the references. However, unless one is Catholic or familiar with the Catholic orders, he may not recognize them readily.

The painting with which Lippo adorns the wall reflects his broad vision of the world. Given the chance to paint, he says,

Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,
 Never was such prompt disemburdening.
 First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
 I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,
 From good old gossips waiting to confess
 Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,--
 To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
 Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
 With the little children round him in a row
 Of admiration, half for his beard and half
 For that white anger of his victim's son
 Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
 Signing himself with the other because of Christ
 (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
 After the passion of a thousand years)
 Till some poor girl, her apron o'er her head,
 (Which the intense eyes looked through), came at eve
 On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,
 Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers
 (The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone. (ll. 143-162)

The picture is a vivid one, but it presents several difficulties that the reader must overcome in order to see how it relates to the rest of the poem. The "black and white" monks which Browning mentions are, of course, these monks, like the Carmelites, or White Friars, who wear white mantles,⁵ and the Dominicans, or Black Friars, who wear black mantles.⁶ The reader must also be aware that during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a criminal could receive sanctuary in the Church and was immune from arrest as long as he was under the protection of the Church. If he does not know this, he will not understand why the victim's son can only shake his fist at his father's murderer.

The murderer is the focal point of the picture, and all the characters which Lippo mentions have a certain relationship to that central figure. The children watch him, the victim's son shakes his fist at him, and the "poor girl" has come to bring him food and to speak to him. The emphasis on the relationship between the murderer and the girl re-emphasizes the importance of physical love. The girl evidently both says words of love to the "brute" and brings him flowers to show her love.

The major difficulty of the passage is a result of Browning's use of parentheses. When a writer uses several parentheses in a row, the reader expects there to be some parallel relationship between

⁵"Carmelites," Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1965), IV, 927.

⁶"Dominicans," Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1965), VII, 572.

the parenthetical statements. This expectation is increased here because in the first parenthetical phrase Christ is the one who "sees," and the reference to eyes in the second parenthetical clause may be misconstrued as a reference to Christ's eyes, rather than to the "intense eyes" of the murderer who watches the girl who has come to aid him.

Lippo continues,

I painted all, then cried "'T is ask and have;
Choose, for more's ready!"--laid the ladder flat,
And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
Being simple bodies,--"That's the very man!
Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes
To care about his asthma: it's the life!" (ll. 163-171)

The introduction of the Prior's niece may not seem important to the first reader, and he may skip over it without taking note. If this is the case and he does not keep the Prior's niece in mind, he will miss a great deal of the significance of the core of the poetry to come. The first reader must also recognize that at this point Browning is entering the main discussion of the poem, that on the nature of art. If the reader is fully to appreciate the complex theoretical considerations to come, he must give careful attention to the attitude of the Prior toward Lippo's work.

Lippo's success is temporary, for he says,

But there my triumph's straw-fire flared and fumed;
Their betters took their turn to see and say:
The Prior and the learned pulled a face
And stopped all that in no time. "How? what's here?"

Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
 Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true
 As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
 Your business is not to catch men with show,
 With homage to the perishable clay,
 But lift them over it, ignore it all,
 Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
 Your business is to paint the souls of men--
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke . . . no, it's not . . .
 It's vapor done up like a new-born babe--
 (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
 It's . . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
 Give us no more of body than shows soul!
 Here's Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,
 That sets us praising,--why not stop with him?
 Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
 With wonder at lines, colors, and what not?
 Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
 Rub all out, try at it a second time. (ll. 172-194)

The Prior, displeased with Lippo's painting on the church walls, expresses a view of art predominant in the early part of the Renaissance. But the passage may well be obscure for one who is not aware of the change in art which took place during the century of Lippo's lifetime. If he has not seen the flat, one dimensional, stylized figures painted by Giotto and Cimabue under the influence of Byzantine art, he will not appreciate the transformation that took place before painters like Raphael and Michelangelo painted their life-like Madonnas. The reader's background must also permit him to understand, as the Prior understands, that what might be taken for deficiencies in Giotto's art are not the product simply of technical inadequacy but of an attitude and its cultural context.

If the reader has failed to recognize the importance of the Prior's niece earlier, she is mentioned again when the Prior says

of Lippo's painting,

Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say,--
Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!
Have it all out!" (ll. 195-198)

The reader must come to the conclusion that the niece is no casual figure. With this passage and the other information that Browning supplies, the poet demands that the reader recognize that the line "She's just my niece" is ambiguous. For those monks listening to the Prior, the phrase means that the painting of the niece is lifelike. But the line must have another meaning for the reader. The Prior is defending himself by declaring that the woman is only his niece and nothing more while the indications are that the woman is really his mistress. For example, the detail which the Prior notices about the woman in the painting, "that white smallish female with the breasts," is hardly what he would notice about a figure who reminded him of his niece. Moreover, if the figure resembled his niece, it would probably not remind him of "Herodias, I would say,--/ Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!" The Prior's interest in the flesh is important to recognize, for it clearly makes the reader unresponsive to the hypocritical Prior. Lippo, then, becomes a more sympathetic figure, for although he may frequent houses of prostitution, he is not ashamed of his physical desires and certainly does not lie about them.⁷

⁷See Boyd Litzinger, "Incident as Microcosm: The Prior's Niece in 'Fra Lippo Lippi,'" College English, XXII (1961), 409-410.

At this point, only one view of art has been presented, but when the Prior's position is clear, Lippo asks,

Now, is this sense, I ask?
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
When what you put for yellow's simply black,
And any sort of meaning looks intense
When all beside itself means and looks naught. (ll. 198-204)

Again, for the reader to understand Browning, he ought to be familiar with the style of art during the early Renaissance. The figures in the paintings do not have lifelike flesh tone. Instead, the skin is often a yellow color shadowed by grays and blacks.

Continuing his argument, Lippo says,

Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,
The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint--is it so pretty
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
Sorrow or joy? (ll. 205-211)

It would be difficult to find a better example of the subtle control of Browning's poetry and its capacity for concentrated implication which the reader may miss but need not. The picture of the Prior's niece has brought to the Prior's mind the sinful image of Herodias. To Fra Lippo, though he does not negate her sensual meaning, the girl suggests the patron saint whom she will represent in his painting. Here subdued but unmistakable is a contrapuntal emphasis on the contrasting attitudes of the two men toward the flesh.

Lippo asks,

Won't beauty go with these?
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
 And then add soul and heighten them three fold?
 Or say there's beauty and no soul at all--
 (I never saw it--put the case the same--)
 If you get simple beauty and naught else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks. (ll. 211-221)

By substituting the flesh-tones of a beautiful woman for the yellow-gray, tortured faces seen in the paintings of the early Renaissance, Lippo desires to reproduce the beauty of the flesh.

Returning the focus of the poem to the dark alley, Lippo says,

Well, well, there's my life, in short,
 And so the thing has gone on ever since.
 I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds;
 You should not take a fellow eight years old
 And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
 I'm my own master, paint now as I please--
 Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house! (ll. 224-227)

By referring back to information given at the beginning of the poem, Browning helps to bring the reader back to the present and refreshes his mind about Lippo's present situation in the alley.

Suddenly changing the direction of the monologue, Lippo cries,

Lord, it's fast holding by the rings in front--
 Those great rings serve more purposes than just
 To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse! (ll. 228-230)

The pronoun "it" has no immediately clear referent, and unless one is familiar with the appearance of the Medici palace, he will not

immediately know that the "rings" are large iron loops that are attached to the front of the building. Although the reader's memory must retain the fact over the preceding 150 lines, the "it" is surely the rope ladder by which Lippo descended from his room.

Lippo indicates in the following lines that although he is no longer in the convent, the influence of the Prior lingers, for he says,

And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
 Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,
 The heads shake still--"It's art's decline, my son!
 You're not of the true painters, great and old;
 Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;
 Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:
 Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"
Flower o' the pine,
You keep your mistr . . . manners, and I'll stick to mine!
 I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!
 Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,
 They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,
 Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
 To please them--sometimes do, and sometimes don't;
 (ll. 231-244)

Both Lorenzo and Angelico represent the older painting style in contrast to Lippo's desire to "fag on at flesh."

If the next few lines are to be appreciated, the reader must see that Lippo links his philosophy of art to his attitude toward the importance of the physical side of man's nature. In other words, Lippo desires to reproduce the flesh accurately because for him, as for Browning, the flesh cannot be separated from the spiritual realities which the older painters attempted to represent in sharply dualistic isolation from the world. One may observe that here the

subtly pantheistic tendency of Browning's thought must have confronted an obstacle in the puritanism of Victorian preconceptions.

Lippo sacrifices what he values most when he paints as the brothers wish him to; therefore, at these times he is most vulnerable to the claims of the flesh. He says,

For doing most, there's pretty sure to come
A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints--
A laugh, a cry, the business of the world--
(Flower o' the peach,
Death for us all, and his own life for each!)--
And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
And play the fooleries you catch me at,
In pure rage! (ll. 245-254)

"These wild things" to which Lippo refers are, of course, his romantic escapades. The reader should at this point remember that Lippo had been painting "saints and saints/ And saints again" when he slipped from the Medici Palace. At such times he finds he must rebel against the suppression of the flesh.

In order to illustrate his position, Lippo presents a metaphor in which the reader must see that "grass" is comparable to the flesh which Lippo has been discussing. Lippo explains,

The old mill-horse, out at grass
After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
Although the miller does not preach to him
The only good of grass is to make chaff.
What would men have? Do they like grass or no--
(ll. 254-258)

The reader must realize that Lippo actually means, "Do they like flesh or no?" Lippo is also implying a contrast between the

millar and the Prior, the miller who recognizes the use of grass,
and the Prior who denies the use of the flesh.

Lippo asks,

May they or may n't they? All I want's the thing
Settled forever one way. (ll. 259-260)

The reader must connect this statement of conflict with the earlier lines 76-79 in which Lippo declares that his action is disapproved of primarily because he is a monk. There seems to be a conflict between the nature of man and the teaching of the church. And because this conflict does exist, man is torn between the two. Lippo declares,

As it is,
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
You don't like what you only like too much,
You do like what, if given you at your word,
You find abundantly detestable.
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
I always see the garden and God there
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
The value and significance of flesh,
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards. (ll. 260-269)

Lippo's reference to the creation implies that he believes the teachings of the church conflict with what God teaches. The lesson, "the value and significance of flesh," is God's teaching, not the teaching of those like the Prior who openly deny the importance of the flesh, yet secretly require a mistress to fulfill the desires of the flesh.

You understand me: I'm a beast, I know.
But see, now--why, I see as certainly
As that the morning-star's about to shine,
What will hap some day. We've a youngster here
Comes to our convent, studies what I do,

Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
 His name is Guidi--he'll not mind the monks--
 They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk--
 He picks my practice up--he'll paint apace,
 I hope so--though I never live so long,
 I know what's sure to follow. You be the judge! (ll. 270-280)

If the reader is not familiar with the change in art that has already been alluded to, he will not realize that Lippo is prophesying what actually did happen in the history of art. The changes which Lippo was significant in initiating became part of the established style of painting in the later Renaissance.

Lippo addresses the captain of the guard directly for the first time in many lines, and goes on to say to him,

You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
 However, you're my man, you've seen the world
 --The beauty and the wonder and the power,
 The shapes of things, their colors, lights and shades,
 Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!
 --For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
 The mountain round it, and the sky above,
 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
 These are the frame to? What's it all about?
 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,
 Wondered at? oh, this last of course!--you say.
 But why not do as well as say,--paint these
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
 God's works--paint any one, and count it crime
 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
 Are here already; nature is complete:
 Suppose you reproduce her--(which you can't)
 There's no advantage! you must beat her, then," (ll. 281-299)

As Lippo talks he presents both sides of his view of art, and the reader must understand them if he is to realize fully Lippo's position. He explains that if man values the physical world, he should not oppose the clear representation of it, both the landscapes of nature

and the men and women who inhabit the earth. They are God's creatures, and they ought to receive recognition as such. However, there are those, Lippo says, who might object, saying that a painter can only reproduce God's creations imperfectly. But Lippo answers this objection, saying,

For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;
 And so they are better, painted--better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 (ll. 300-304)

If Browning were attempting to present his views on art in the clearest possible way, he would put them in the form of a logically organized prose essay, but because he prefers the poetic form and chooses to present ideas indirectly through Lippo's conversation with the chief of the guards, the reader must be aware of certain information which might ordinarily be provided in a prose essay. As the discussion of art becomes more complex, Browning puts greater demands on his readers. Lippo's statements become more philosophical, and the ideas in the poem may become more difficult to grasp if the reader is not acquainted with Platonism. A relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world which is similar to Plato's is clearly reflected when Lippo says,

God uses us to help each other so,
 Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
 And trust me but you should, though! How much more,
 If I drew higher things with the same truth!
 That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
 Interpret God to all of you! (ll. 305-311)

He seems to imply that through an awareness of the physical world, one can catch a glimpse of the spiritual world, and that by painting men and women as they really are physically, he can more clearly reflect the spiritual aspect of man. In other words, the more accurately he reproduces the physical embodiment of the idea or form, the nearer he is to producing truth.

As Lippo continues, he amplifies this philosophical idea. He says,

Oh, oh,
It makes me mad to see what men shall do
And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
"Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"
Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain
It does not say to folk--remember matins,
Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well. (ll. 311-322)

Lippo is re-emphasizing that art's function is not to direct men to action but rather to reveal greater truths about existence.

When Lippo mentions Saint Laurence for the second time, the reader must realize that although Browning himself does not make the distinction, in the first reference he was referring to a church but that here he means the saint himself for whom the church was named. Lippo declares,

I painted a Saint Laurence six months since
At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
"How looks my painting, now the scaffold's down?"
I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns--
"Already not one phiz of your three slaves

Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
 But's scratched and prodded to our heart's content,
 The pious people have so eased their own
 With coming to say prayers there in a rage;
 We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
 Expect another job this time next year,
 For pity and religion grow i' the crowd--
 Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang the fools!
 (ll. 323-335)

Although Lippo has tried to be diplomatic in his compromising position, in the emotion of the defense of his argument he goes too far when he says, "Hang the fools!" and the reader must conclude from what follows that Lippo, knowing he has overstepped his bounds must make amends for his attack on the views of the church. He immediately stammers,

--That is--you'll not mistake an idle word
 Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, God wot,
 Tasting the air this spicy night which turns
 The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!
 Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now!
 It's natural a poor monk out of bounds
 Should have his apt word to excuse himself:
 And hearken how I plot to make amends.
 I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece
 . . . There's for you! (ll. 336-345)

The reader must see from what Lippo says that the captain has shown at least a momentary change in attitude which Lippo fears enough not only to promise to paint a new picture to make amends to the church, but also to bribe the captain as he previously bribed the captain's men in lines 27-30. When he says, "There's for you!" he must be handing money to the captain.

Hoping his bribe will bring results, he continues,

Give me six months, then go, see
 Something in Sant' Ambrogio's! Bless the nuns!
 They want a cast o' my office. (ll. 345-347)

Browning's further reference to landmarks in Florence like Sant' Ambrogio's may cause the reader further consternation if he still is not aware of the setting of the poem. At the convent, says Lippo,

I shall paint
 God in the midst, Madonna and her babe,
 Ringed by a bowery, flowery angel-brood,
 Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet
 As puff on puff of grated orris-root
 When ladies crowd to church at midsummer.
 And then i' the front, of course a saint or two--
 Saint John, because he saves the Florentines,
 Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white
 The convent's friends and gives them a long day,
 And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
 The man of Uz (and Us without the s,
 Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
 Secured at their devotion, up shall come
 Out of a corner when you least expect,
 As one by a dark stair into a great light,
 Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!--
 Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck--I'm the man! (ll. 347-364)

As the reader begins the last section of Lippo's description of his painting, he must keep several things in mind in order to understand what Browning is doing. Having begun the passage in future tense, Browning shifts to present tense to give the picture immediacy and life. In this case the time indicators are deceptive, and the reader must remain alert to see that the period of action, although expressed in the present tense is still occurring in the future. Also, the reader must recognize that Browning uses the passage to restate the theme of the poem and to show the relationship

of the physical and spiritual worlds. As he describes the picture,
Lippo says,

Back I shrink--what is this I see and hear?
I, caught up with my monk's things by mistake,
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
I, in this presence, this pure company!
Where's a hole, where's a corner for escape?
Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
Forward, puts out a soft palm--"not so fast!"
--Addresses the celestial presence, "nay--
He made you and devised you, after all,
Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there draw--
His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?
We come to brother Lippo for all that,
Iste perfecit opus!" (ll. 365-377)

Lippo implies that the artist, through his ability to reproduce his
figures accurately, gains a sort of salvation. Although he is not
saintly, he has the ability to paint the saintly. The plea of the
"sweet angelic slip of a thing" is heard,

So, all smile--
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
Under the cover of a hundred wings
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go
The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.
(ll. 377-387)

The physical and spiritual worlds are linked by the Prior's
niece. Although she is a very physical creature, the Prior's mistress,
she is at the same time a "little lily thing," indeed, "Saint Lucy."
Through her physical beauty, one can appreciate saintly beauty.

In describing the picture, Browning assumes that the reader is familiar with the painting which he describes, for only then does the phrase "Iste perfecit opus!" make sense. If one were not aware of the meaning of the Latin phrase or that it is painted beneath the figure thought to be Lippo's self portrait, the reader might find the phrase extremely obscure.

Knowing that his promise of amends will satisfy the captain, Lippo says as he leaves,

And so all's saved for me, and for the church
 A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
 Your hand, sir, and good-by: no lights, no lights!
 The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,
 Don't fear me! There's the gray beginning. Zooks!
 (ll. 388-392)

The demands which Browning makes on his reader in "Fra Lippo Lippi" are of three basic types. First, Browning makes numerous allusions to places in Florence, to the Catholic Church, its saints, and its practices, and to events in art history that may not be generally known. Secondly, he utilizes unusual and irregular syntax that sometimes necessitates careful reading. Thirdly, he gains much of his effect in poetry through the association of disparate ideas and sees relationships which the ordinary reader might not immediately recognize.

Those who have explained the difficulties in Browning's poetry as the manifestation of a psychological block imply by their assertion that the demands which Browning makes on his reader are not intentional.

They imply that Browning wanted to write as clearly as a poet like Tennyson but that he could not bring himself to do it because of a conflict within him. However, that Browning found it psychologically impossible to tell the reader that the setting of "Fra Lippo Lippi" is Florence or that Browning could not write a sentence with a subject, verb, and object is difficult to accept. A more acceptable explanation of the difficulty of Browning's poetry is that Browning was developing his own unique form and style that differed radically from that to which the nineteenth century was accustomed but which, in fact, is precisely what the twentieth century demands.

The form of dramatic monologue, if it is used at all, entails certain difficulties because of its very nature. Mr. S. S. Curry says in Browning and the Dramatic Monologue:

One who looks for mere effects and not for causes, for facts and not for experiences, for a mere sequence of events, and not for the laying bare of the motives and struggles of the human heart, will be apt soon to throw the book down and turn to his daily paper to read the accounts of stocks, fires, or murders, disgusted with the very name of Browning, if not with poetry.⁸

The difficulty which results from the use of the dramatic monologue is certainly intentional on Browning's part. He chose the form, developed it, used it because he thought that it would best convey the sort of poetry he wanted to write.

The dramatic monologue also necessitates that there be allusions

⁸S. S. Curry, Browning and the Dramatic Monologue (Boston, 1908), p. 2.

which are not always explained. Information can not be related to the reader as it might be in a narrated work. The reader must rely entirely on what might be natural for the speaker to say in his particular situation. But Browning can hardly be condemned for obscurity if he does not explain fully each allusion. John Press writes,

Most of us feel a comforting glow of intellectual pride when we catch an oblique and esoteric allusion and commend the poet for his fine sense of cultural tradition; but should his references fall outside the field of our special interests the temptation is to blame him for clogging his poetry with a mass of recondite knowledge.⁹

If one knows Renaissance history and art well, and is knowledgeable in the history and customs of the Catholic Church, he will find few difficult allusions in Browning. One need only recall Eliot's footnotes to The Waste Land to be reminded of the acceptability for modern poetry and poetics of private allusion and allusion based on special knowledge.

Browning's irregular syntax must surely present a problem to most readers. However, since the dramatic monologue presents a person's ordinary speech, the language must sound like ordinary speech, not like carefully planned, artfully contrived oratory. No doubt Fra Lippo Lippi speaks in sentences without subjects and verbs and in sentences with inverted order, but at the same time, he speaks naturally, as anyone speaks in ordinary language. As G. K. Chesterton

⁹Press, p. 52.

makes clear, there are those who find Browning difficult because of his rugged syntax, but one can hardly condemn Browning for what is a basic characteristic of his style. Chesterton says,

Now, to say that Browning's poems, artistically considered, are fine although they are rugged, is quite as absurd as to say that a rock, artistically considered, is fine although it is rugged Browning had an unrivaled ear for this particular kind of staccato music. The absurd notion that he had no sense of melody in verse is only possible to people who think that there is no melody in verse which is not an imitation of Swinburne the question is whether there are not certain things which can only be conveyed by that method.¹⁰

The use of regular syntax is certainly secondary to presenting a poem which reflects life honestly. In fact, Donald Davie points out,

What is common to all modern poetry is the assertion or the assumption (most often the latter) that syntax in poetry is wholly different from syntax as understood by logicians and grammarians. When the poet retains syntactical forms acceptable to the grammarian, this is merely a convention which he chooses to observe.¹¹

The irregular syntax, especially the omission of basic words in a sentence, is related to the last demand which Browning makes of his readers. Browning, says Robert Langbaum,

break[s] up conventional syntax and multiply[s] associations with bewildering rapidity, in order to make us feel that the things language has laid out in space and time and in order of succession are really happening simultaneously--in order to restore the instantaneous, orchestrated quality of the original perception.¹²

¹⁰Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Robert Browning (New York, 1903), p. 145.

¹¹Donald Davie, Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry (London, 1955), p. 143.

¹²Robert Langbaum, "Browning and the Question of Myth," PMLA, LXXXI (1966), 579.

Browning makes heavy demands on his readers, demands which the critics of the nineteenth century were not willing to meet. But modern criticism recognizes that the poet, if he is writing anything of merit, must expect the reader to be able to participate actively in the poetic experience. As with the modern poets, in reading Browning, says William Lyons Phelps,

active, constant cerebration on the part of the listener or the reader is essential. This excludes at once a considerable number of whom the effort of real thinking is as strange as it is oppressive.¹³

The Victorians found Browning difficult to accept because they desired that their poets teach some moral message in simple language so that the masses could understand it. However, the charges of "obscurity" which they made against Browning are not acceptable in the twentieth century because contemporary poetics does not require that the poet teach, but rather that he present his perceptions about the world in language that most effectively embodies his perception. Communication is secondary to a successful embodiment of the perception in language. Those characteristics of Browning's poetry that the nineteenth century criticized do not go beyond what is acceptable in modern poetry, but are instead, as this last chapter has attempted to show, those very characteristics which mark his unique style. One may object to Browning because he is difficult to read, but he must see the

¹³William Lyon Phelps, Robert Browning, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 65.

difficulties as inherent in Browning's style, not as the manifestation of a psychological inability of the poet to express himself clearly.

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