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The Perfidy of The Devils’ Council

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BROWNING'S AMBIGUITIES AND
THE RING AND THE BOOK

by Tom J. Truss, Jr.

The greatness of Pippa Passes is readily acknowledged by readers of Browning, but where the greatness lies is open to considerable discussion. Apart from the difficulties involved in its sprawling, unusual plots, the moral structure of the world of the play leaves unresolved problems. For instance, the song which concludes with "God's in his heaven—/All's right with the world"¹ inspires a murder and a suicide. In another episode, the perpetrators of a practical joke on Jules are not granted, as they had expected, an opportunity to laugh. Their failure to have their laugh notwithstanding, Browning does not make them suffer corrections for having tried to inflict pain. Furthermore, from their attempted evil springs a possible good for Jules. The morality of the situations of the play is quite complex. In the internal logic of the plot, the sins of Ottima's and Sebald's self-destructiveness should prey on Pippa's conscience. Browning keeps her innocent, however; she is the ingenuous and unwitting agent of various acts of violence. The soliloquy which Browning gives her concerning her influence on other people is fitting and accurate:

I should like to really know:
How near I ever might approach all these
...  
so as to touch them, so
As to ...
Do good or evil to them some slight way.
(III, 78-79)

Whether Pippa did good or evil to the characters in the play is left in doubt. By creating ethical dilemmas, the play raises rather than solves moral problems; and Pippa herself becomes Browning's

parallel for the power of art on the beholder—art in its loosest sense, such as music, painting, song, argument, poetry. The ethics of the impact of art, for Browning, is ambiguously controlled by the personality of the beholder.

Browning dramatizes the point frequently. Galuppi's musical portrait of sensual Venice, for good or evil, makes the scientist-speaker of the "Toccata" feel "chilly and grown old" (VI, 76). The artistry of Blougram's ambiguous self-characterization inspires Mr. Gigadibs, for good or evil, to abandon his precepts and begin working out new ones. Even the cleverness of Sludge's evil hoaxes uncovers a crime to gnaw on Hiram H. Horsefall's conscience. The systems of ethics emerging from the imagery of "Mr. Sludge: The Medium" contradict each other. The ambiguity of a work of art is perhaps most succinctly illustrated by the Renaissance Duke's interpretation of his last Duchess's portrait. Her liking whatever she looked on with looks which went everywhere makes her subject to almost any interpretation—anything from a sainted wife to a flirtatious hussy. The personality of the beholder distorts the reality of the thing beheld. Actually, the real character of the last Duchess is beside the point. The Duke's major concern is that the next Duchess be more to his taste, and Browning concentrates on the Duke's consciousness of the interview with the ambassador. In a discussion of Browning, the question of what a poem means needs to be partly reduced to a consideration of what an object means to a beholder. The dramatic monologue contains a beholder's consciousness of and responses to objects, human and material, in an ever-changing world.²

A central problem in studying a speaker's consciousness is assessing its limitations. Browning's characters, in varying degrees, struggle like the Grammarian for permanent, objective truth; but because of their humanity, they never completely apprehend it: "Truth remains true, the fault's in the prover."³ The Duke's humanity distorts the truth of his Duchess's portrait and places its meaning outside the reader's range of inquiry. The appeal of Browning's characters thus lies not necessarily in what they find

²It is impossible to acknowledge the extent of the indebtedness I owe to Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (New York: Random House, 1957).
in their search for truth, but in the mode of their search—not in their discourse, but in the unique consciousness revealed by their discourse. The meaning of the “Epistle... of Karsish,” for instance, lies not in what the speaker says about Lazarus, Jerusalem, or blue-flowering borage, but in the open-minded artless bewilderment which discoveries excite in his consciousness. Karsish’s identical observations about the madman Lazarus’s report and about borage—“It is strange” (IV, 197, 198)—are ambiguous. With characteristically adroit handling of details, Browning controls two consciousnesses: the narrator’s and the reader’s. The strangeness which Karsish is aware of is different from the strangeness which the reader is aware of. Browning’s readers have a completer view of the world of a poem than do his speakers; and a statement may have one meaning for a speaker of it, another for a reader, and still others for fictional listeners in the poem.

*The Ring and the Book* is a brilliant mosaic of variously contradictory consciousnesses of a vast series of horrible events. Apart from an obscurely brief and hence rather meaningless account of the events in Book I, Browning never tells his readers what in truth happened. We merely think we know what happened by studying the components of the limited consciousnesses of the holders of the events. Whether they are participants or bystanders is ultimately beside the point. The accounts are not mutually supporting, and the reader never knows with complete confidence what happened. He knows only the personalities of the holders.

Caponcachi’s and Pompilia’s trip in the carriage furnishes a good illustration. The accounts of the priest and of the heroine differ in many details. According to Pompilia, Caponsacchi pointed out famous places in route; Caponsacchi made no mention of them in his account. According to Caponsacchi, Pompilia asked about the women in his life; Pompilia apparently forgot about making the inquiry. The speakers do not misrepresent details or fabricate them; they take different memories away from a common event, and the reader views the components of their consciousnesses. Caponsacchi, the priest on guard for Guido’s pursuit, was quite alert to the passage of time; Pompilia, safe in his care, was oblivious of the passage of time, even during her waking periods. Browning left us in doubt concerning the facts of the trip. The meaning of the trip to those who made it, however, is clear enough.
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The impact of Pompilia's presence on Caponsacchi's life is well known; in his contemptuous testimony to the judges, he showed contempt for himself and for the world. In teaching the court, he ingenuously served the function which the Pope later attributed to him—"the first experimentalist/In the new order of things" (X, 139, 11. 1910-1911). He was an experimentalist which the reader knows to be for good or for evil and which the Pope hoped to be for good. The impact of Caponsacchi on Pompilia is similarly important. His presence gave her strength and repose—strength to repel Guido at Castelnuovo and to bring Gaetano into the world, and repose for the remainder of her short life. Each passenger in the carriage between Arezzo and Castelnuovo made meaningful inroads into the consciousness of the other, and ironically, neither knew the extent of his influence on the other. Caponsacchi's view of himself indicates his limited consciousness: "I was born, have lived, shall die, a fool!" (IX, 90, 1. 181). The Pope, Pompilia, and Browning's readers have a different view of him. The meaning of the trip in the carriage is ambiguous; it depends on the consciousness of those taking the trip.

Ambiguities in the character of a bystander are apparent in an analysis of Other Half-Rome. He is a shy bachelor who significantly keeps at the edge of the crowd. His version of the story perhaps most nearly approximates what happened; but in his elevation of Pompilia, he almost overlooked Caponsacchi. His insights into Guido and Pompilia are almost identical to Caponsacchi's and the Pope's. His sensitiveness to Guido and to Pompilia and his blindness to Caponsacchi are unmistakeable clues to his consciousness. He obviously knew some artists, for he seems to have a first-hand acquaintance with the comments of the painter Carlo Maratta, who drew sketches at Pompilia's side during her final moments; and he had a keen sense of meaningfully ironic dramatic situations. In his reconstruction of the scene of the murders, he carefully fused the goodwill message of Christmas with acts of violence; and like a writer planning an ominous description, he made the bell toll periodically during the night of the murders. The language of the stage is used in his account: he speaks like one who has a first-hand acquaintance with acts and scenes, in discourse which contrasts sharply with the superficial and foppish awareness of the dilettante Tertium Quid for the theater. Tertium
Quid, in fact, ultimately connects the violence with a Punch-and-Judy show. Other Half-Rome has the characteristics of a person who is interested in painting, in the stage, and in writing; and he brings an artist's sensitiveness to bear on his search for truth. He is acutely aware of goodness, of villainy, of pain, of the need for a moral order in the world; but a person's capacity to rise to deeds of daring is beyond his consciousness. His own manhood has not developed enough for him to feel a need to give close attention to Caponsacchi's part in the story. The ambiguity of Other Half-Rome's character is apparent. He is a timid, feckless, would-be artist, and at the same time a careful, generous observer. Like the anti-heroes of "Dis Aliter Visum" and "Too Late," Other Half-Rome would not risk everything at a moment of crisis. His anger does not rise until he reaches the end of his account, and the deeds which it might inspire would provide too little too late.

The ambiguity of Pompilia is less apparent and perhaps more contrived. She becomes ambiguous in proportion to the distance from her at which reports are made. Browning assigns her lines which, taken at face value, might be easily misinterpreted by someone like Half-Rome. In her innocence and goodness, she does not wish to associate her memory of Guido with her son; but out of context, without reference to her artlessness, her words are self-incriminating: "My babe nor was, nor is, nor yet shall be/Count Guido Franceschini's child at all" (IX, 238, 11. 1762-1763). In Bottini's description of her, Pompilia liked whatever she looked on, with looks which went everywhere:

The lady, foes allege, put forth each charm
And proper floweret of feminity
To whosoever had a nose to smell.

... first come was first served.
(X, 13, 11. 298-306)

By carefully delineating Pompilia as a person about whom a variety of opinions might be held, Browning created a character who was ambiguous to those who did not know her as Caponsacchi knew her or the readers of her monologue know her. Browning furthermore placed her in the nunnery of the Convertites, where prostitutes were cared for. Bottini planned to parade Pompilia as
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a chief of sinners after the excitement of the Carnival and the executions died away. The final impression of her in the Roman mind would have been erroneous, but the truth of its existence is central to the meaning of the poem.

The manner of Guido's death provides a clearer ambiguity. His final words, in which he desperately called for the intercession of what to him was an arch-fiend, Pompilia, indicate that he went to his death impenitent. According to the letter from a "Venetian visitor at Rome" (X, 245, l. 28), his confessors reported that he ended well. The reader is left in the dark. The gambling letter-writer could have been misinformed, the confessors could have lied, or Guido could have had an unaccountable change of heart between the appearance of the executioners at his cell and his conveyance through the crowds.

At the level of abstractions, Browning makes certain precepts ambiguous. Half-Rome drew his defense of Guido from nature. For him, the law of nature took precedence over the law of the court. Modern man, he alleged, had become effete, and respect for human law had made him inert. A return to righteousness and order necessitated a return to masculine dominance, to the point of brutality: "Who is it dares impugn the natural law," he asked; "Deny God's word, 'the faithless wife shall die?" (VIII, 117, 11. 1477-1478). For the sake of his argument, specious though it might be, Half-Rome made the forces of nature and divinity coincide, and thereby defended Guido's slaying of his wife. The Pope referred to nature and divinity in explaining Pompilia's compulsion to escape from Arezzo:

Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,
Accept the obligation laid on thee,
Mother elect, to save the unborn child.

(X, 106-107, 11. 1073-1076)

In the first instance, the law of nature requires a violent end of life, and in the second, a meaningful beginning of life. Although the Pope's designation of "fool" puts Half-Rome's statement in perspective, the prelate's assertion does not clarify the matter, for it has the effect of overlooking the existence of nature. The meaning of nature in the poem remains ambiguous.
The study of causal relations reveals additional subtleties. Inquiry into the source of the mischief in the poem takes one back to the shadowy and remote regions of the life of Pompilia's mother. Of itself, this origin is hardly enough to foreshadow the violence which develops. With a less villainous Guido or, ironically, a less virtuous Pompilia, the poem would not have been worth writing. The architecture of The Ring and the Book is peculiarly similar to that of the single short monologues. They are all spoken at moments of crisis: Fra Lippo Lippi, for instance, on his being found in an embarrassing situation; Andrea, in a domestic argument; Blougram, on his being subjected to an agnostic's inquisition; St. Praxed's bishop, on the occasion of his death; and Sludge, on his hoaxes being discovered. The Ring and the Book occurs at a moment of crisis. The crisis comes not in the life of an individual but in the life of a society. The forces for good or evil, like Pippa's influence, are at work in the world. Their origins and their results remain unknown. Since, for example, one never knows whether Lucrezia is the source or the symptom of Andrea's decline, the poem about the faultless painter is a fragment with neither beginning nor end; it is all middle, which starts and stops. The Ring and the Book is an artistically conceived fragment of human history at a moment of crisis, which is all middle. Half-Rome's sentiments reached back into the social order of the past, and the Pope looked in vain for precedents in the past. Facing the judges, Guido looked into the future and envisioned, despite his villainy, a Utopia of noble manners, pure laws; according to the Pope, Caponsacchi was a first experimentalist in a new order of things. And Pompilia looked to the future in giving her son the name of a new saint, Gaetano. Whether good or evil is predominant in the new order, Browning left unanswered, and he similarly placed the ultimate origins of good and evil beyond man's range of inquiry.

Browning takes the long way of art to speak the truth that the human condition is ambiguous. The crisis of the warfare between good and evil is resolved artistically in Gaetano, whose destiny is unknown. Yet one's hopes for him are high. His life was lived in a new century, with a new pope, although it became the age of Voltaire. Gaetano is thus the ambiguous legacy of the crisis, and as such he parallels the destiny of humanity. The Truth contained in Browning's long way is dramatized in the form of a sustained multiple ambiguity.