

A FEW WORDS ON BROWNING'S
"THE RING AND THE BOOK"

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Foreword

It was an achievement of mine to read *The Ring and the Book* once at all to the end. My reading is very insufficient, and a considerable part of it is still in obscurity. After reading, however, I very seldom come across the lines of this poem quoted in other books but I remember in reading. This consoles me much, and gives me the minimum courage to say a few words about this poem. The following is my humble effort to give a bird's-eye view of this gigantic literary work, laying stress on two major characters in it, Caponsacchi and Pompilia. My intention is to give a rough general survey of the whole poem, leaving multifarious questions (inevitably) untouched, judging it better than wait for the time when I shall be able to understand every corner of the poem, (of course comparatively speaking), I do not know for how many years.

Two Japanese translations of *The Ring and the Book*, though not of the whole of it, were published in Tokyo, 1957; one is the Translation of Book I with Notes by Mr. Fumio Nakajima, and the other is the Translation of the first five Books, Book I to Book V, by Mr. Yonesaku Odagiri. Both are very conscientious, painstaking efforts, and they make us think that *The Ring and the Book* is still read and studied, at least in this country, though Duckworth says (in his *Browning, Background and Conflict*, 1931, p. 90) that nobody reads it nowadays.

I. *Prologue*

(Study of Book I)

It is a famous story that the material of *The Ring and the Book* was furnished by *The Old Yellow Book* which Browning obtained for a lira (eight pence) at a second-hand bookstore in Florence. Although the general story is given in it, that clumsy old yellow book would never have held much meaning, had it not been for Browning who discovered it and related the story. As we shall see later, the poet added his fancy to its raw material, and made out quite a new thing. Book I is the poet's own introduction, and in it he gives the outline of the story of the poem.

Not only from it, but from the eleven other Books of *The Ring and the Book*, I have written the following synopsis.

At the end of the seventeenth century, there lived in Rome an old couple, Pietro and Violante Comparini by name. "They lived in a style good enough for their betters, and indulged themselves in luxury, till they got into debt and creditors began to press. Driven to seek the Papal charity, reserved for respectable paupers, they became pensioners of the Vatican"¹, and Pietro came to own

some usufruct, had money's use
Lifelong, but to determine with his life
In heir's default. (II, 210-2)²

All they wanted was a child, but they could not hope to get one, being over fifty years of age. The crafty Violante then thought of a trick. She contracted secretly to buy from a base woman living in a vile way, the latter's baby at that time still in the womb, and declared that she was going to be a mother. When a baby-girl was born, Violante miraculously succeeded in palming it off on Pietro, her husband. The baby's mother died at her parturition, and the baby, whom the couple named Pompilia, grew as an ordinary baby grew.

When Pompilia was thirteen, Count Guido Franceschini, the eldest son of a noble at Arezzo (town, 54 miles South-East of Florence), was looking for a wife in Rome. He was nearly fifty, far from handsome, and had spent in vain thirty years in Rome, trying to get a position either in the political or the ecclesiastical world, and, having to return to his private estate in the country, wanted to secure a "moneyed" wife, for his family was poor. His brother, Paolo, engaged himself in this search, and it happened that one day he heard of the Comparini at a barber's shop, and lost no time in coming to them to ask the hand of Pompilia for the Count.

The vain Violante thought nothing about the difference of age between the Count and Pompilia, but was only delighted to think that her daughter would become Countess, and she and her husband, as the Countess's parents, could spend their remaining days in a palace. Paolo, then, by tactics of concealing this and exaggerating that, succeeded in so moving Violante that she at last consented to the marriage without the least knowledge of Pietro. Thus the marriage took place between the "beak-nosed, bushy-bearded, black-haired, lean, pallid, low of stature, yet robust, fifty-year old" (I, 774-6) Guido Franceschini and the beautiful, tall, slim, thirteen-year old Pompilia. The ceremony was conducted in the church of San Lorenzo, by Paolo, who was himself the Abate.

Pietro was exasperated on hearing this, but the thing done could not be undone. He could only accept the accomplished fact; and he so resigned himself to it that he paid down an instalment of his daughter's dowry, and made up the deficiency by transferring to the newly-married couple all that he actually

¹ Berdoe, Edward, *The Browning Cyclopaedia*, p. 406.

² Roman numerals show the Books, and Arabic numerals, the lines. (Scribner's ed.)

possessed, for Guido wisely invited the couple to live in his castle for life, in order to squeeze out the last penny of Pietro.

As they began to live in Arezzo, however, everything was disappointment to the Comparini. Starvation and cruelty were the only things they found in place of their imagined luxury. They could no longer live there, and after a few months, they fled to their home, Rome, beggared, leaving poor Pompilia behind.

By this time Violante's sin had overtaken her. She took the opportunity of the Jubilee of the Pope's eightieth birthday to get absolved for her underhand dealings about Pompilia by confessing them in public. Her confession pleased Pietro, however, for he thought that, by disclaiming Pompilia as their real child, he could recover her and the lost money. He filed a suit, and the court decreed a compromise that Guido should be allowed to keep Pompilia's money to the extent of her dowry. Pietro appealed, and the case remained unsettled.

The chief sufferer of these proceedings was Pompilia. Guido's tyranny was hard on her body and soul. The resentment and greed could only result with such a man as Guido in an increased aversion from her. From this time on, his only aim was to get rid of his wife, without thereby losing any money, and he concluded that the only way of doing that was to accuse her of infidelity.

At that time there was in Arezzo a man called Caponsacchi, who, though a priest, was handsome, and a prominent figure in society. He was the man whom Guido chose to figure in an imaginary adultery with Pompilia. With this aim in mind, Guido treated his wife with every kind of cruelty to make her call him for help. Pompilia could not understand Guido's intention, and implored in turn the Grand Duke and the Archbishop of Arezzo, and also Guido's cousin Conti, to protect her from her husband's violence, but in vain, for the whole twon was either in the interest or dread of Guido. She hardly knew Caponsacchi, but had heard of him as a resolute man, and in this helpless situation of hers, he grew in her mind as the only help sent from God. Just then she discovered that she was going to be a mother, and the duty she felt to save the child gave her courage, and on one occasion which was set intentionally by Guido for them to meet, Pompilia persuaded Caponsacchi, not without difficulty, to take her to Rome, (about 170 miles to the South-South-East of Arezzo), where she and her child would be safe.

Thus it came to pass that one night in April 1697, the two took flight from Arezzo in a cab. But when the fourth day of the flight dawned, Guido stood at the gate of the wayside inn where they had spent the night. Guido, however, did not kill them, but called in the law, in whose charge he left the, as he thought, polluted couple. Then they all hastened to Rome, where a court was opened for them. In spite of the love-epistles which Guido produced in a bundle to avouch their guilt, the court believed in their innocence. The fact, however, of the flight was patent, and could not be left unquestioned. The court found itself in a dilemma, and the result was a merely nominal punishment on the two, sending Pompilia to a convent, and relegating Caponsacchi to Civita Vecchia.

Guido, of course, was not satisfied, and at once wanted a divorce. The appeal

was being prepared by his brother, Paolo, when a letter from Rome utterly changed the circumstances. The letter informed Guido, then at Arezzo, that Pompilia had given birth to a son by Guido, and that she had concealed the baby lest her husband should get hold of it. In wrath, but rejoicing that, if he could get hold of his real son, and kill Pompilia and the old Comparini couple, the entire fortune would surely be his, Guido hastened to Rome, a dagger in hand, with four assassins hired from his estate. Pompilia was then staying with her parents in a villa outside a city gate of Rome, and resting her fatigued body after the delivery. The five villains came to the door on the night of January 2, 1698, called, "Open to Caponsacchi," and when the door was opened, rushed in, and most brutally murdered the three.

Guido had planned to cross the frontier into Tuscany, his own department, after the crime, during the night, but very unlike him, he had forgotten to have the warrant ready for hiring horses, and the five murderers trudged on foot in blood-stained clothes. In the morning they were apprehended while sleeping, exhausted, in the roadside straw.

The news frightened Rome. When the bodies of Pietro and Viloante were exhibited in public in the church of San Lorenzo, the church where the secret marriage had been conducted four years before, people crowded the church to see them. Pompilia miraculously escaped death, and was lying in the poor house a-dying, when Guido entered the city on horseback, thickly guarded by police.

Rome was in clamour, discussing which to blame. The court used a rack on Guido to squeeze out a confession from his mouth. Caponsacchi, then at Civita Vecchia, was summoned; Pompilia, on her deathbed, was heard. Her Christian gentleness and absolute maiden modesty under the suffering of her last days were peerless, but her life was spent before the court's decree was given. After her death, there were pleading and counter-pleading of advocates, and the court finally sentenced the five criminals to death.

Guido then appealed, by virtue of his clergy, (for he had a priesthood of low rank), to the Pope as his last resort. The Pope was Innocent XII. His wisdom and his trust in God enabled him to see each character as in a clear mirror. He did not listen to any compromise, but positively declared that the five should be executed the very next day.

Thus on February 22, 1698, Guido was beheaded, and the four young assassins were hanged at the square of Piazza del Popolo, while all Rome witnessed.

Book I is the prologue of the drama, spoken before the rising of the curtain, and when the poem opens, the poet begins to speak, showing a yellow book to the reader,

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I' the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers? (33-5)³

³ Numerals show the lines of Books which are under study, here of Book I.

This light tone at the beginning shows the poet's exultant pleasure in relating the long story to the reader. He sees "a hand, always above his shoulder" (39-40) that guided him to find that book in a shabby stall of Florence. His pleasure, it must be noted, is linked to a Hand. It was in June of 1865. Browning was strolling in the square of Lorenzo in Florence, among many stalls filled with odds and ends of Time's ravages, when his eyes fell on that yellow book among other dusty, dog-eared books in a second-hand bookstall. He called, "Stall!" and a lira made that his (82). He says he got absorbed in the book, read so eagerly while walking, that he almost had finished it when he reached home. The passage in which he describes the things in the street while his feet carried him home, is a good example of Browning's full-of-life expression.

I leaned a little and overlooked my prize
 By the low railing round the fountain-source
 Close to the statue, where a step descends:
 While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and rose
 Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made place
 For marketman glad to pitch basket down,
 Dip a broad melon-leaf that holds the wet,
 And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read
 Presently, though my path grew perilous
 Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait
 Soon to be flapping, each o'er two black eyes
 And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine:
 Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,
 Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape,
 Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear,—
 And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun
 None of them took my eye from off my prize.
 Still read I on, from written title-page
 To written index, on, through street and street,
 At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge;
 Till, by the time I stood at home again
 In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
 Under the doorway where the black begins
 With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
 I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth
 Gathered together, bound up in this book,
 Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest. (91-117)

Italy which is so beautifully represented by Shelley in English literature is again here, with another personal colour. Shelley's Italy is a shiny, yet lonely dream-land, while Browning's is musical and animated. He "mastered the contents, knew the whole truth" (115) of the book he had bought; each character was enlivened, and the composition of the drama was made up in him. He knew of

course that he had to add a great deal to the dry documents of the book. He sat down; and when he had thought the matter over, and looked at what he was going to do, he was reminded of a thing. That was a trick which Italian jewellers use when they make a gold ring:—pure gold, being too soft and unable to bear the file's tooth or hammer's tap, they add an alloy to obtain a necessary hardness, and when their work is finished, wash away the alloy with acid, and leave a gold ring pure and compact. Browning made his fancy the alloy, because the contents of the yellow book, though pure, were crude, and could by no means become an expression of art by itself. For the alloy, the poet's fancy is necessary and enough; there is no need of theology; "fancy with fact is just one fact the more" (458); the poet "fuses his live soul and that inert stuff, before attempting smithcraft" (463). The fact, which is the result of fact plus fancy, is truer than the actual fact. This indeed is the poet's duty and right. Man is the *made*, and so he does not *make*, but he *grows*. What is growth? It is the attempt to *make* by virtue of the quality of being the *made*, i.e. being partly God. Thus Browning says:

Man,—as befits the made, the inferior thing,—
 Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
 Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,— (705-7)

and by this attempt, the pure crude fact,
 wrought into a shapely ring therewith,
 Hammered and filed, fingered and favoured, last
 Lay ready for the renovating wash
 O' the water. "How much of the tale was true?"
 I disappeared; the book grew all in all. (677-81)

The poet believes that the moment he finishes the poem, he disappears and the book remains; that he has done the office of the maker, and the book grows.

As an example of the poet's salient fancy, his alloy, the Godly part of the poem, here is a passage in which he describes the nocturnal scene viewed from the Florentine terrace, on which he stepped out at midnight after being absorbed in his divine writing.

Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked
 A bowshot to the street's end, north away
 Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
 By the river, till I felt the Apennine.
 And there would lie Arezzo, the man's town,
 The woman's trap and cage and torture-place,
 Also the stage where the priest played his part,
 A spectacle for angels,—ay, indeed,
 There lay Arezzo! (491-9)

Next he sees the road over which Pompilia and Caponsacchi fled, the squalid inn at Castelnuovo, and Rome, where the tragedy closed, and he says:

The life in me abolished the death of things,
 Deep calling unto deep: (514-5)

and .

hearts beat hard,

And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since. (86-7)

Everything has life for the poet, and the two hundred years, the lapse between the thing's actuality and the poem's actuality are non-existent. He hates the withering of the individual, and every character who speaks and acts in the old document is alive before him.

Documents and records are but dry, lifeless things, however well and minutely written, and mind and heart animate, move, and govern the human world; hence Browning says:

it is the glory and good of Art,

That Art remains the one way possible

Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least. (XII, 838-40)

From 830 to 1381, the poet writes the introduction for the eleven Books that follow. Brevity, still more his oddities, render that portion very hard to read.

Book I can thus be divided into three parts, i.e. (a) The poet's intention; (b) Outline story; (c) Introduction of Bk. II—Bk. XII. Book I is therefore the miniature form of the whole *The Ring and the Book*, thus justifying the name the Book bears. Browning closes it with the words of dedication to the Lyric Love (Mrs. Browning), beginning with the invocation:

O Lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird. (1383)

It is natural that Browning should dedicate his longest poem published in 1868-9, to his dear wife who died on June 28, 1861.

The Old Yellow Book is only an ordinary record of a law-suit, not uninteresting, but not at all an inspired document of humanity. In it Guido appears not so wicked, and Pompilia and Caponsacchi not so heavenly, as we find them in the poem. Browning has enhanced the moral standard of the story, and has written it at a very high moral pitch throughout.

II. *Caponsacchi*

(Study of Book VI)

Of the development of the three important characters, Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and Guido, the development of Caponsacchi is the finest. Caponsacchi and Guido are "contrasted types of the spirit of good and the spirit of evil conquering in man."⁴ Up to a certain period in life, their conduct is much alike, and when they are forced to act by the same character Pompilia, one becomes a devil, and the other a saint. How Caponsacchi becomes a saint, Browning makes clear in the monologue of Caponsacchi, in the writing of which the poet successfully avoids the danger of making the priest's monologue his autobiography, and of thus disturbing the artistic unity of the whole poem. The striking feature of

⁴ Brooke, Stopford A., *The Poetry of Robert Browning*; p. 406.

this Book is its poetry. The Book is full of expressions, which are poetical in the ordinary, not Browning-like, sense of the term, and this is due to the fact that the speaker is a man who took delight in composing madrigals daily, from boyhood, as his own words show.

The murder was committed. We see Caponsacchi summoned from Civita Vecchia, the place of his relegation, to speak before the court. Guido is in prison, and is being tortured daily. He was heard yesterday in the court where we see Caponsacchi now. Before the same judges, Caponsacchi spoke eight months ago, when his flight with Pompilia failed. The scene of that time revives in him, and he remembers that Guido was a butt of ridicule, and that the court believed in Caponsacchi's innocence. To-day he says in a low voice, "You, Judge Tommati, who then tittered most" (34), and again, "I got the jocular piece of punishment" (30). He is resentful that the thing has come so adversely to him, and that the law was not the stronghold to which he could trust everything. A storm of suppressed sorrow rages beneath all his words, and he says, "I talk impertinently, and you bear" (204).

According to him, he was a younger son of the house, oldest now, greatest once, in his birth town, Arezzo. His grand uncle was a famous bishop of Arezzo, and he was educated to be a priest from childhood, and when he told Bishop, under whom he was sent as a pupil, his aversion from the strict life of priest, the bishop of that easy time, told him that the church was strong enough to bear a few light priests, and that he could be free, if he wanted, to devote himself to cultivate that superior gift he had of making madrigals. After he became a priest, he says:

According to prescription did I live,
 —Conformed myself, both read the breviary
 And wrote the rhymes, was punctual to my place
 I' the Pieve, and as diligent at my post
 Where beauty and fashion rule. I throve apace,
 Sub-deacon, Canon, the authority
 For delicate play at tarocs. (339—45)

We can imagine the church, whose social weight was strengthened by priest's assiduity in society and with women. In that way, making his madrigals and confessing fine ladies, he lived for four years.

One day when he was at theatre with a canon, whose name was Conti, there came, mingled with the people, "a lady, young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad" (395). That was Pompilia. After she sat, he "was still one stare" (402). His friend, seeing this, threw a comfit to her. Then, Caponsacchi says, "she turned, looked our way, smiled the beautiful and strange smile" (407-8). That gaze of Caponsacchi and this smile of Pompilia were the beginning of their spiritual love, the life's truth, as Browning believes, and the germ of so many vicissitudes, ranging from heaven to hell, afterwards.

Then Conti, being Guido's cousin, told Caponsacchi everything about the

household of Guido; that Guido had married Pompilia three years before, just for money's sake, that first the girl's parents were at Arezzo, who, however, Conti saw, were always crouching in Guido's house like "two old frightened family spectres—close in a corner, each on each like mouse on mouse in the cat's cage" (420-2). Conti also said that he did not go to Guido's mansion much, "for the chamber's cold and the coffee pale" (417-8). These are admirable sketches of Guido's household, but we must be on our guard, remembering that this is Guido's house as described by Conti, his cousin, and again Guido's house as pictured by Caponsacchi, as he had heard of it from Conti. Every word spoken in this Book is Caponsacchi's. We can glance at other minor characters as they were reflected in him. Conti's words were a frank, and a little thoughtless appeal to his friend-priest, for he advised the latter to "Spare her, because he (Guido) beats her, as it is, and she is breaking her heart quite fast enough" (441-2).

From the first night, Pompilia's image never left Caponsacchi, and he says:

That night and next day did the gaze endure,
 Burnt to my brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes,
 And not once changed the beautiful sad strange smile. (430-2)

Pompilia's smile was a shaft that went deep into Caponsacchi's heart. It had such a strange effect that something was aroused in him, and was started into motion, and after a while he found himself plunged in a kind of whirl. He determined to go to Rome, and said to the Bishop:

The fact is, I am troubled in my mind,
 Beset and pressed hard by some novel thoughts.
 This your Arezzo is a limited world;
 There's a strange Pope—'t is said, a priest who thinks.
 Rome is the port, you say: to Rome I go.
 I will live alone, one does so in a crowd,
 And look into my heart a little. (470-76)

While he was thus troubled, Guido did not rest, and one day there came a messenger carrying a letter, forged by Guido as from Pompilia. The woman appeared before Caponsacchi in the following manner:

There came a tap without the chamber-door,
 And a whisper; when I bade who tapped speak out.
 And, in obedience to my summons, last
 In glided a masked muffled mystery,
 Laid lightly a letter on the opened book,
 Then stood with folded arms and foot demure,
 Pointing as if to mark the minutes' flight. (498-504)

The letter informed him that Pompilia had a warm heart to give him, and asked him to come that night to the terrace overhanging the street. The letter also gave the reason: "Because my husband is away" (513). Caponsacchi took up a pen and wrote:

"No more of this! That you are fair, I know:

But other thoughts now occupy my mind.
 I should not thus have played the insensible
 Once on a time. What made you,—may one ask,—
 Marry your hideous husband? 'T was a fault,
 And now you taste the fruit of it. Farewell." (522-7)

Soon in like manner came the second letter, in which she regretted his failure to come to the tryst, and telling of her husband's cruelty, implored him, Caponsacchi, to take her to Rome if he went. "So the missives followed thick and fast" (609), to which Caponsacchi's answer was always in one tone, namely:

"Go your ways, temptress! Let a priest read, pray,
 Unplagued of vain talk, visions not for him!

In the end, you'll have your will and ruin me!" (624-6)

The last line is a very daring, defying, expression, and well reveals Caponsacchi's personality. He is not a priest of faultless morality, nor a man meticulously trying to be faultless. He is ever challenging, ready to mock if one deserves. He likes to taste the delight of derision at the cost of moral perfection. Otherwise, how did he at all answer Guido's forged letters?

One day, Pompilia's (really Guido's) letter, in quite a different tone from those before, announced that her husband had found out her love, and urged Caponsacchi's prompt departurè. To this the priest sent an answer undauntedly:

Tell him he owns the palace, not the street

Under—that's his and yours and mine alike. (644-5)

He meant that Arezzo was Arezzo of everybody, and that he could not be interfered with, whether he stayed in or out. Caponsacchi only saw Guido's grin through the letter. So he determined to go to the very terrace of Guilo's castle when he was wanted to come, even as he had not gone when he was invited. Caponsacchi went, and, quite unexpectedly, found at the window of the castle,

with lamp in hand,

Pompilia; the same great, grave, grievful air
 As stands i' the dusk, on altar that I know,
 Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,
 Our Lady of all the Sorrows. (691-5)

Then the woman vanished like a spectre, and even before his surprise ended, reappeared on the terrace overhanging the street, above Caponsacchi's head, and, with a blush and in an entreating manner, began to talk to the priest.

So far we must see that Guido's trick was rewarded amply, for it was Guido's aim to frame up a scene about which he could accuse his wife of infidelity, and now Caponsacchi came of his own accord to where Pompilia was waiting, his letter of warning having merited just the intended contrary thing. We may say that Caponsacchi was outwitted by Guido, if the former's intention was really to keep away from Pompilia. Although the love between Caponsacchi and Pompilia was spiritual, and came to life at their first glance in the theatre, neither was conscious of it clearly, and they had been conducting themselves, at least outwardly, as an

ordinary wife and a priest. This interview of the two was the key which set all the tragedy in motion, and it was Guido who turned it.

She began, Caponsacchi says, saying that he had sent many letters to her, but she had read none, being unable to read or write, and that she was so much in the power of the woman, the messenger of letters, that, she said, "I am

Obliged to listen while she inculcates
 That you, a priest, can dare love me, a wife,
 Desire to live or die as I shall bid,
 (She makes me listen if I will or no)
 Because you saw my face a single time.
 It cannot be she says the thing you mean." (717-22)

Pompilia justly knew that Caponsacchi was not the sender of the letters which she was reluctantly forced to listen to, but her need of help was so urgent that no choice was left her but to be frank about her sad plight, with the man who stood before her and seemed to be her last hope. Though she said, that "good true love would help her then so much" (724), no mistake can be greater than to judge that she was looking for love from Caponsacchi. All she wanted was just a chivalrous hand to extricate her from her then plight; she would thank him cordially, but would do no more. She said, like a child, for a defence of what she was doing:

The silvercup upon the altar-cloth
 Is neither yours to give nor mine to take;
 But I might take one bit of bread therefrom,
 Since I am starving, and return the rest,
 Yet do no harm: this is my very case.
 I am in that strait, I may not dare abstain
 From so much of assistance as would bring
 The guilt of theft on neither you nor me. (729-36)

She was indeed starving, and making the minimum guilt, if any, for saving herself. She instinctively knew and spoke:

it is only you in the wide world,
 Knowing me nor in thought nor word nor deed,
 Who, all unprompted save by your own heart,
 Come proffering assistance now, (742-5)

and also

you are true, have been true, will be true. (865)

There is no shadow of selfish or sexual love, no attempt on her part to impress upon him that she was worth saving. She implored him saying that there remained only death for her if he was cool. She subtly suggested to him the new life, which had begun to grow in her, and which had roused her soul from the bottom so curiously, that she knew of no other way of speaking of it than by a riddle.

it has got to be
 Somehow for my own sake too, and yet not mine,
 —This is a riddle—for some kind of sake
 Not any clearer to myself than you,
 And yet as certain as that I draw breath,—
 I would fain live, not die—oh no, not die! (750-5)

Her desire to live was indomitable, to her rather surprisingly, and she cried most strongly:

Take me to Rome!
 You go to Rome, the servant makes me hear.
 Take me as you would take a dog,.....

.....
 Walk, go: then help me to stand, walk, and go!
 The Governor said the strong should help the weak:
 You know how weak the strongest women are,
 How could I find my way there by myself?
 I cannot even call out, make them hear—
 Just as in dreams. (798-813)

These lines are clear and strong.

Caponsacchi's answer to this appeal was an immediate consent, the idea flashed to him. But his heart must go through pain to enter the new life. What he was going to do was an elopement, to say the least, and it would mean the utter ruin of his terrestrial hope, including the possibility of being a future Pope. He knew, however, that "into another state, under new rule, himself was passing swift and sure, whereof the initiatory pang approached, which, however, was felicitous annoy, bitter but sweet, as when the virgin-band, the victors chaste, feel, at the end, the earthly garments drop, and rise with something of a rosy shame into mortal nakedness. So, he lay and let come the proper throes which would thrill into the ecstasy and outthrob pain." (949-58).

The celestial love, so far hidden, revealed itself in him, when he heard Pompilia's words, God's words now, which there was no choice but to obey. So he says to the judges:

Sirs, I obeyed. Obedience was too strange,—
 This new thing that had been struck into me
 By the look o' the lady,—to dare disobey
 The first authoritative word. 'T was God's.
 I had been lifted to the level of her,
 Could take such sounds into my sense. (995-1000)

Here Caponsacchi most distinctly recognizes his being lifted to the level of Pompilia, from the base state where he had been sauntering. He had passed the probation, and finding himself, began to live on the highest level allowed by God to man. He knew well that he was going to sin, but he knew that God had taken him into His confidence, and could say:

Duty to God is duty to her. (1015)

I should sin: God forgives. (1024)

The flight was ready. In a midnight of April, Caponsacchi waited for Pompilia in the darkness, and between midnight and morn, began in the east a distant whiteness, which waxed whiter and whiter, grew nearer and nearer, till it was she. "To Rome," he said to the driver, and in another tick of time,

Sprang, was beside her, she and I alone. (1133)

The description of the flight which begins here is the most beautiful part of the poem. According to Caponsacchi, their action was the flight to the true thing. So long as he lived in society, making madrigals, his life was not real; neither was Pompilia's, while she lived with Guido, praying for death. The flight is where the two wills longing for truth meet. They were bound by spiritual love, the strongest truth, and therefore the strongest tie of souls, in Browning's philosophy. Truth and love are identified. Fearing lest their love should be taken as selfish, Caponsacchi says to the court:

You know this is not love, Sirs,—it is faith,
The feeling that there's God, he reigns and rules
Out of this low world. (1173-5)

What Pompilia felt was likewise truth, though she had no power of philosophizing. While driving fast, she was the happiest woman in the world. She indulged in many innocent girlish stories; asked Caponsacchi to read a prayer when the angelus was heard from a distant church; kissed a baby of a woman at the inn where the couple stopped. One morning, when she awoke to another blue day, she asked, pointing to a tree, in the branches of which she saw the glaring sun, saying:

How do you call that tree with the thick top
That holds in all its leafy green and gold

The sun now like an immense egg of fire? (1315-7)

and, on another occasion, she said to Caponsacchi from the bottom of her heart:

Yours is no voice; you speak when you are dumb. (1295)

But flight was flight. Sometimes Pompilia saw an illusion of Guido overtaking them, and Caponsacchi whipped the horses, praying, "Help us, God, whom the winds carry!" (1373-4).

The third day came to its close; 'the sky was fierce with colour from the setting sun' (1381-2); it was twelve miles to Rome, when at last she gave in, exhausted, and swooned, unable to ride any further. They passed the night in a roadside inn at Castelnuovo. Next morning dawned, and when the inn was making ready the coach for the last stage of the journey, Caponsacchi says:

'T was the last minute,—needs must I ascend
And break her sleep; I turned to go. And there
Faced me Count Guido. (1407-9)

The nonchalant, easy attitude with which Browning describes this crisis, creates a strong dramatic effect, and the breathless intensity of the moment is more clearly before us, than if the scene was painted with a hundred bombastic words. Guido

opened his mouth with mock reverence to the law, briefly counted the crimes of the two, and turning to the officials, said, "Do your duty quick! Arrest and hold him! That's done: now catch her!" (1445-6). Upstairs, in her room, Pompilia was still sleeping in her travelling clothes; aroused by the clattering footsteps, she saw before her the triumphant Guido and the arrested Caponsacchi. "She started up, stood erect, face to face with the husband, who fell back and was buttressed by the window, which was all a-flame with the morning-red, he being the black figure, the opprobrious blur against all peace and joy, and light and life" (1497-1501). "Away from between me and hell!" (1502), she cried, and sprang at the sword that hung beside Guido, seized, drew, and brandished it. The sunrise burned for joy on the blade, and she cried, "Die, devil, in God's name!" (1520). But they all closed round her, and she lay on the floor dead white and disarmed.

Her anger was at its height when seeing Caponsacchi lie arrested, she shouted, "Him, too, my sole friend, Guardian and Saviour?" (1515-6). She was, as it were, in divine anger. Her picture would be marred, had she succumbed and collapsed without showing resistance. She knew that she was God's (1504), and to those who know that they are of God, any obstacle is of the devil, which must be spurned into the mud. "Guardian," "Saviour," or any other names by which Pompilia called Caponsacchi at this critical moment manifest that the two were spiritually bound.

The two were arrested, and borne to separate cells of the same prison in Rome, never to see each other alive again. They were tried and found "of guilt enough to be compatible with innocence" (1708-9), and received a light kind of punishment, Pompilia being sent to a convent, and Caponsacchi relegated to Civita Vecchia.

Here the contact of the two ends, for Caponsacchi never left Civita Vecchia until he was summoned by the court, and never saw Pompilia again. But while Caponsacchi speaks, Pompilia, who miraculously escaped death, is on her death-bed in a poor house, and he now turns to speak rather to himself, recollecting a few days of true life he had spent with her.

By no chance but because God willed it so—
 The spark of truth was struck from out our souls—
 Made all of me, descried in the first glance,
 Seem fair and honest and permissible love
 O' the good and true. (1786-90)

But, even while he was speaking, the death of Pompilia was reported. Then Caponsacchi grows almost incoherent in his mental distress, speaking now in scorn of those around, now in anger at himself. Then he grows calm again, speaks of his being either in or out of the world, now he is a relegated priest, and concludes with a despairing cry:

O great, just, good God! Miserable me! (2076)

In Browning a moment means everything. Touched by Pompilia, Caponsacchi

awoke; awoke and burst his hoops asunder. Caponsacchi is *great* in that the shaft of divine light *could* pierce him, while Conti, his friend, is *not great*, for the same light *could not* pierce him.

III. *Pompilia*

(Study of Book VII)

Receiving twenty-two wounds, five deadly, Pompilia did not die on the spot, and lying "in the good house that helps the poor to die" (I, 1077), she tells her story since her birth, to the inquisitive faces about the bed. Each breath seems to exhaust her life, but she is calm, and her reason is not clouded. She has no sorrow, but a satisfaction, as she says:

The day that one is dying,—sorrows change
Into not altogether sorrow-like;

I do see strangeness but scarce misery,

Now it is over, and no danger more. (343-6)

Her monologue is the explanation of this calmness. Her life spent with Guido was blank, and it is only her girlhood, and the time of and after her flight, that are alive to her at this moment. She gives thanks that she is a specially blessed soul, now that her life is only lingering on the verge of the earth, to take flight to something high any moment. She feels no pain, and the colour of her monologue is decidedly bright.

We may say that *The Ring and the Book* is the story of Pompilia, because the part she plays in it is greater than that of any other, and there is no part in the story where we do not see her. The flight, however, is the most important of her doings, and the character with whom she performs it is Caponsacchi. We have two stories of the flight, told by Caponsacchi a man, and by Pompilia a woman; and it is interesting to note that the stories are similar where they should be similar, and different where they should be different.

First let us see what a great part the idea of motherhood occupies in Pompilia's mind. The need of saving a life in her, is shown in nearly all the Books of the poem, but never so vividly and strongly as by Pompilia herself. Besides, this Book is unique in describing the young mother who thanks God for her baby, evidence of God's love, and who, placing maternal love above all things, imagines the love which her mother must have felt to her, still in the womb.

She never speaks long without referring to her baby. She hopes that, if people should leave any record about her death, they might leave out all description about the mode of her death (murder), but say that she has been a mother of a son exactly two weeks old. Her life was sad, because she was given, not to God, but to man, from the beginning, and she says she will never make the same mistake, but will entrust her son to God, and then die:

Him, by death, I give
 Outright to God, without a further care,—

.....
 What guardianship were safer could we choose? (891-5)

She cannot bear the thought that her baby is the son of the horrible Guido, the man of blackness and sin, and says:

My babe nor was, nor is, nor yet shall be
 Count Guido Franceschini's child at all—
 Only his mother's, born of love not hate! (1745-7)

It is surprising how her consciousness of being a mother has thus far been developed. Had she been killed when she was overtaken by Guido, at the wayside inn, her motherhood would have been nipped away far too soon, and we would have missed Pompilia the mother. As she speaks, motherhood seems to be her whole thought, the culmination of her earthly life.

The thrill with which a girl first feels her child in her is a most subtle and mysterious thing, but in Pompilia the meaning was greater than in ordinary girls. In the black nothing-ness of her married life, she says, there grew two truths: the Hand which proved to be Caponsacchi's, and the promise of a child. In Guido's house, "life meant with her a successful feigning of death" (997); when night came, her whole thought was, "Done, another day! How good to sleep and so get nearer death!" (1209-10). How unlike Browning this conception of life is! Though it is a pitiable life, the pitiable is most always not true. Pompilia's life would have been nullity if left alone; her soul would have sunk into most wretched perdition. It is justly guessed by Guido himself that "What you call my wife, I call a nullity in female shape." (XI, 1109-10). Her rescue came with a child and Caponsacchi.

With a thrill in her body, she began to feel, "How right to be alive!" (1236), and "Not to live, now, would be the wickedness" (1246), and at the interview with Caponsacchi, she appealed to him in these terms:

Now I imperil something more, it seems,
 Something that's trulier me than this myself,
 Something I trust in God and you to save. (1425-7)

The child is the extension of self, which, whether to kill or save, is left to human freedom. To kill is blasphemy, and to save is God's will. Her bold appeal, "He wills you serve by saving me" (1419-20), can only thus be accepted. She did not implore, but was confident that she was speaking God's words. Caponsacchi's answer to this appeal was no less bold; he said, she says, "I am yours" (1433).

Man is the *made*, and therefore does not *make*, but *grows*, and the height that a man can grow to, by God's grace, is Truth and Eternity, i.e. God. Browning repeatedly says this in this poem, and here the poet makes Pompilia say, in connection with her flight, that "Right used might" (1616), or "Truth singed the lies" (1624), and of the next life approaching her, in these words: "I (Pompilia)

got foretaste too of better life beginning where this ends" (1653-4). This resoluteness of self-rescue, which is evinced by Pompilia, is on the high way of the growth of humanity, the only right way open to her there and then.

So much for Pompilia's self-rescue, as springing from motherhood. Now let us see how Pompilia speaks about Caponsacchi. The first time she saw him was, as Caponsacchi says, at a theatre in Arezzo, when the "fat waggish Conti, friend of all the world" (980), who was her husband's cousin, threw a comfit into her lap. She turned, and met Caponsacchi's gaze which thrilled her so thoroughly that she, who then was daily trampled on by Guido's tyranny, fancied:

Had there been a man like that,
To lift me with his strength out of all strife.

Into the calm, how I could fly and rest! (991-3)

This was the seed of her love for him. The story of the forged love-letters told by her is mostly the same as Caponsacchi's story. Hearing that the Archbishop and his followers, and with them Caponsacchi, were going to Rome, now Easter was over, she had secretly made up her mind to follow them herself. Though she knew not how to go, a light was thrown by this resolution, and after many days of planning, one morning in April, she got a sudden courage, and says, "Up I sprang alive, light in me, light without me, everywhere change! A broad yellow sunbeam was let fall from heaven to earth,.....I too am to go away. I too have something I must care about" (1212-27). By this time the scandal of Caponsacchi and Pompilia was being gossiped about throughout Arezzo, and the names of the two had got to take "a half-grotesque, half-ominous, wholly enigmatic sense" (1318-9). That morning, the messenger-woman, whom Pompilia detested, came again, and told her that Caponsacchi was leaving that day, and that he had stood throughout the previous night under her room, and watched her lattice, and, as if to bait her, said that it would be a great pity if he should go broken-hearted. Pompilia was seized with anger at her effrontery, but, troubled with the thought that he was going, in a dream-like frenzy she had been experiencing from the morning, she stopped her hand, then combing her hair, turned to the woman, and shrewdly said, "Tell Caponsacchi, he may come" (1346). What harum-scarum words! It is to be imagined that Pompilia repented the moment the words left her lips, but there at least was a relief that what ought to come she had let come; she was no more excited when, asked by the woman, "At what time?" she answered, "After the Ave Maria!" (1365). And we must remember that in whatever way their interview was brought about, it meant the success of Guido, whose aim was to accuse them of adultery.

The adoration of Caponsacchi spoken by her is almost everywhere. In love, there is no superiority of the one over the other; self is effaced and lovers see something divine in each other. Thus Caponsacchi apotheosizes Pompilia, and she him. Let us look at some instances of our heroine's implicit faith in the priest. When her appeal for help to fly was answered by "So I am yours" (1433), she felt as though she saw a star in the distant sky, leading and guiding her over

the desert, and she said:

So did the star rise, soon to lead my step,
Lead on, nor pause before it should stand still
Above the House o' the Babe,—my babe to be. (1434-6)

When she describes the flight, she says their travelling road was what Caponsacchi had woven with his strong will.

I could believe himself by his strong will
Had woven around me what I thought the world
We went along in. (1544-6)

She further compares the road they ran along to the milky way, and says:

As I look back, all is one milky way;
Still bettered more, the more remembered, so
Do new stars bud while I but search for old. (1550-2)

The sparks of Truth must have seemed as many twinkling stars. On the fatal eve, when the tap was heard on the door, and the name of Caponsacchi was spoken outside, she felt, she confesses:

My great heart, my strong hand are back again! (1793)

and at one place she calls him,

O lover of my life, O soldier-saint! (1769)

These names given to Caponsacchi are equivalent to *Guardian* and *Saviour*, the titles by which she calls him, as we saw in the Book of Caponsacchi, and well indicate the absoluteness of Pompilia's love for him.

Pompilia and Caponsacchi were baptized, as it were, by love. Caponsacchi seems trying to avoid the word 'love', and Pompilia does not use the word because of her ignorance of it. They were under its influence, however, since their first meeting. The first glance opened their eyes to the truth of life, and they struggled to tear off the sleeves from the grasp of their *old* selves. Sore as this struggle was, they would have fallen victims to the sorrow that petrified Great Duke Ferdinand and Riccardi's bride in Browning's *The Statue and the Bust*. Caponsacchi and Pompilia were great, because they quickly responded to the call of God. They spurned their old ugly shells, and came out as new born man and woman. The darkness disappeared in a wink, and the world became bright like a day. It was a world heaving towards the smiling face of God, and they were left each to call the other by whatever names they pleased. The development of these two characters was not gradual, but made at one leap. Browning is the man who preaches the value of a moment, and such value he very often attaches to love. We see the examples in his *Youth and Art*, *Dis Aliter Visum*, *The Statue and the Bust*, *Love among the Ruins*, *Porphyria's Lover*, *Summum Bonum*, etc. His own conduct of carrying off Miss Elizabeth Barrett to Italy, from her father's home, when their marriage was not allowed, and marrying her and living with her the happiest life, is a striking interpretation of this conviction. The story of

Caponsacchi and Pompilia is evidently another. And because of the truth which the two lives attained to, they shine forth with lustre in the immensity of the poem.

Although the height of her life was not reached before she fled with the priest, the possibility of its so blooming forth, had been nursed from her girlhood. Her own story of her infancy and married life evidences this possibility, while it brings to light many minor characters about whom she speaks.

The Comparini, the putative parents of Pompilia, and the victims of the murder, are only to be known from Pompilia. Violante, vain, calculative, and the most womanish of women, made the start of Pompilia's life a mistake, and that proved to be the germ of the whole tragedy. All Violante needed was a child, the heir to a fortune, which, in default of a child, would not be theirs, and she contracted with a woman to buy the latter's baby (in the womb) whose father "was no one, and any one" (290). The baby Pompilia was shown to Pietro and neighbours as Violante's own. Pompilia says that this trick, in Violante's mind, was no great evil, for Violante thought that real lies were lies told for harm's sake, whereas this of hers had good at heart, good for herself, her husband, and her daughter. As one with a guilty conscience often does, Violante sought to make secret amends, and simply from this motive, tried to carry out the marriage. Count Guido Franceschini was not a slim, tall, handsome youth, as Pompilia, then thirteen-year old girl, had expected, but "an old man, nothing so tall as herself, hook-nosed, and yellow in a bush of beard" (390-2). But Pompilia girlishly said:

Here, marriage was the coin, a dirty piece
 Would purchase me the praise of those I loved :
 About what else should I concern myself ? (403-5)

What a pure, unselfish girl she was! The marriage took place on "a rainy dark eve of December's deadest day" (422). And when people left the church, Pompilia, silent and scared, joined her mother who was weeping. We have here the best picture of an old, womanish, very humane, woman Violante; she was weeping to see the sweet, innocent, pure, obedient, girl Pompilia, wife of an aged man. Violante forbade Pompilia to tell anybody about the marriage, not even Pietro, saying, "Girl-brides never breathe a word" (456). When they went home, drenched in rain, Pietro, a facetious old man, over sixty, spoke to them laughingly, as he opened the door for them:

Very near
 You made me brave the gutter's roaring sea
 To carry off from roost old dove and young,
 Trussed-up in church, the cote, by me, the kite.
 What do these priests mean, praying folk to death
 On stormy afternoons, with Christmas close
 To wash our sins off nor require the rain ? (458-64)

Three weeks passed, and then Guido and his brother Paolo came to take Pompilia

from them. When these men stood before him, Pietro, Pompilia says, who learned of the incident for the first time,

seemed all red and angry, scarce
Able to stutter out his wrath in words;
And this it was that made my mother sob,
As he reproached her—"You have murdered us,
Me and yourself and this our child-bride!" (485-9)

Something underhand must have happened. Pompilia retired to her room to pray, where Violante soon came and said:

My scheme was worth attempting: and bears fruit,
Gives you a husband and a noble name,
A palace and no end of pleasant things,
.....
We lose no daughter,—gain a son, that's all. (548-54)

Violante and Pietro and their household are described like a picture.

Now returning to the dying Pompilia, we are surprised to find that she, more than pardoning Guido, tries to defend him. She says:

For now,—be fair and say,—is it not true
He was ill-used and cheated of his hope
To get enriched by marriage? (633-5)

It is only long afterwards that she knew that Guido had married her just for the sake of money, and that therefore his hope was frustrated by Pompilia's ineligibility for Pietro's money. It is regrettable that she did not know of it earlier, did not understand whither he sought to drive her by a false charge, and that from ignorance she had made things worse. Again, she goes so far as to thank him for destroying her bodily life, and for giving her soul freedom. Does she pardon him? Yes, she does, as far as the body, whose life he took, is concerned, praying that Guido may make amends with God, not with her. As to her soul, it is at least her gratitude that

His soul has never lain beside my soul:
But for the unresisting body,—thanks! (1716-7)

And in the fading of her life, she wishes she would be permitted to love Caponsacchi eternally in the spiritual world; and she dies longing for the true marriage in the world to come, in which there is no making of contract, with gold on the one side, power, youth, or beauty on the other, but we are "man and wife at once when the true time is" (1819-20).

She is seventeen years and five months old, not an adult woman yet. It is only natural that her story savours of a girl throughout. Among many childish speeches, the passage, in which she describes her ignorance, at first, of the sexual relation of husband and wife, is very noticeable and interesting. The parable with which the Archbishop, to whom she ran for help, let her know that puzzling matter, is just lovely:

Folly of ignorance!
 Know, daughter, circumstances make or mar
 Virginity,—'t is virtue or 't is vice.
 That which was glory in the Mother of God
 Had been, for instance, damnable in Eve
 Created to be mother of mankind. (749—54)

Though the carnal union of Guido and Pompilia was finally brought about, we are to remember, she was not able to love him, and on her dying bed, she offers thanks that his soul has never lain beside hers, but for the unresisting body.

Brooke says that "Pompilia is the purest, tenderest, sweetest, most natural, womanly, and saintly woman that ever was created by Browning."⁵ Her life was not an easy one. Born of a street-woman, and brought up by the people, not very lofty in morals, she was always noble, generous, careless of money, and of a high sense of honour. Destined to marry a man, who proved to be a devil, a torturer, and finally the murderer of herself, she never doubted righteousness, and remained true to God.

IV. *As a Literary Piece*

The Ring and the Book comprises twelve Books which are as follows:

Book I. *The Ring and the Book*. (R. & B.⁶) 1,408 lines. (Book I has the name similar to the whole poem.) The poet speaks in person, before the curtain rises, explaining how the play is written, and should be enjoyed.

Book II. *Half-Rome*. (H. R.) 1,536 lines.

Book III. *The Other Half-Rome*. (O.H.R.) 1,685 lines.

Book IV. *Tertium Quid*. (A Third Something.) (T.Q.) 1,630 lines. In these three Books, Romans are gossiping about the murder.

Book V. *Count Guido Franceschini*. (G.) 2,047 lines. Guido speaks as the first important character, as the Hell-force of the play. Though a prisoner, he is still unconvicted, and is all bravado.

Book VI. *Giuseppe Caponsacchi*. (CAP.) 2,076 lines.

Caponsacchi's part in the story begins three years after Pompilia's marriage, but he plays the most important part in the flight. He is the fulcrum of the play, and this Book is the approach to the climax.

Book VII. *Pompilia*. (POMP.) 1,828 lines.

Pompilia is the heroine of the drama, and the Heaven-force of the play. The Book is most inspired and thorough, and the least biassed narrative of the story. This is the climax.

Book VIII. *Dominus Hyacinthus de Archangelis*. (ARCH.) 1,793 lines.

Book IX. *Juris Doctor Johannes-Baptista Bottinius*. (BOT.) 1,568 lines.

⁵ Brooke, Stopford A., *Op. cit.*, p. 359.

⁶ Books as shown in the following diagrams.

These are a relaxation. The gain-serving, light-hearted lawyers serve as a good foil to other characters, of more or less serious nature.

Book X. The Pope. (POPE) 2,128 lines.

The Pope speaks his judgment. This is the confession of faith, and a white spot to make the next Book blacker.

Book XI. Guido. (G.) 2,419 lines.

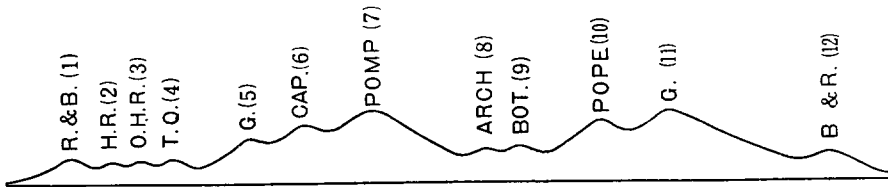
The sentenced Guido raves. Not a shadow of rescue comes. He collapses as a big tree falls. This is the secondary climax.

Book XII. The Book and the Ring. (B. & R.) 870 lines.

The poet again speaks in person. The curtain has dropped. He tells the sequence of the story, and what he has tried to express in this drama.

Total 20,988 lines.

When represented in a diagram, the whole poem seems as if it were a distant mountain-range, whose outline gradually rises from the plain on the left, soars higher, and after making many undulations, gently lowers and yields to the plain on the right again.



Metaphorically, the poem is a ring. The diagram showing a ring, on the next page, also helps to understand the structure of the drama. The portion assigned to each Book shows the dramatic importance.

Written in blank verse, and in dramatic monologues throughout, the method of this poem is quite unique. In a dramatic monologue, the poet takes a critical moment of one's life, and by letting the individual speak, to an imaginative listener, or a group of listeners, reveals not only his life and character, the place and the time, but also the movement of the speaker's heart and the expression of the listening face or faces; and all these without losing the appropriateness of speech. This is by no means an easy achievement, for with no stage setting, no description, no exchange of conversation, and no *aside*, the depth of the human soul must be shown, that is, after rejecting all the advantages of the drama, the dramatic effect must be secured. One dramatic monologue has this much to contend against, but now the difficulty is several times multiplied, for the method of this poem is to make nine persons speak the same story over and over again, each from a different point of view and interest, thereby building up their

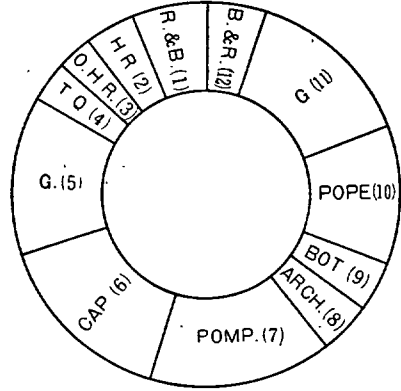
characters, and with all items of material, to complete the plot of the drama.

Why did the poet resort to such a difficult method? The answer is that the message of the poem dictated the method. Browning finds that not in ordinary form of books, can such a story ever be truly told, at least as he wishes it to be told. He intends to show the fallibility of human speech, and the infallibility of the poet's art, and thus wants to write the true life and its salvation. Truth is elusive.

Nobody, not even the Pope, can be final. Men are both better and worse than they know, and only God can judge the heart. Not a character is allowed an infallible knowledge, but, though rare, God's knowledge flashes to every one of them. All are inept, and any two disagree, but as we listen to one speaker after another, the truth evolves out of the chaos.

Is Browning's method the only method for the treatment of the story? Henry James (1843-1916) sketched the story of *The Ring and the Book* as a possible novel, with Caponsacchi for the central figure.⁷ Shakespeare might have written a good drama, and Chaucer a good story. The story itself is not very interesting; it is how the author treats of it that counts. To say that somebody could have written a similarly great novel from *The Old Yellow Book* is not at all discreditable to Browning. He chose to do it, and did it in his own way. He is unique, as poets, dramatists, novelists ought to be.

From a philosophic or religious point of view, there is no thought, in this poem, which we cannot find in other poems of Browning. Of each representation of the poet's thought, we can find perhaps better examples in his shorter poems. This long poem, however, is the melting pot of all his thoughts, and there is nothing that the poet ever possessed that we cannot find here. In this sense this poem is the work most representative of Browning. It seems a melting pot, but we gradually know, as we study it, that there is no confusion in it, that the hugeness of the poem is the hugeness of a great river, into which every body of water, from a mountain-rivulet to a big branch stream, flows as tributary. In reading it, we are too often met by every kind of Browning's oddities, together with his beauty and vigour, and we are given no time or place, when or where we can have the bird's-eye view of the whole, and it is not until we have finished it, and are placed at some distance, that we realize the wide unity of impression,



⁷ Elton, Oliver, *A Survey of English Literature, 1830-80*, Vol. I., p. 381.

and hear the great ocean of humanity. Browning, in one word, is a poet of life. His knowledge of human life is like that of Shakespeare.

Browning can never be proof against the lure of practising intellect when writing poetry. Indeed, *The Ring and the Book* is a mixture of Browning's two elements, imagination and wit. Each Book shows a different ratio of mixture of the two. His defects in form are not only those ensuing from his pleasure of practising intellect; there are harsh and formless lines, burst of metrical chaos, and passages marked by a coarse violence of expression that is nothing short of barbarous. John Morley says,⁸ after speaking of these defects, that the countrymen of Shakespeare have had to learn to forgive uncouth outrages on form and beauty, to find creative genius as Browning.

The sustained energy of the whole poem is marvellous. There is a rhythm, as that of flowing water, throughout. The poem never flags, never showing the faintest indication of fatigue, whether one can really undersand the meaning of the passage well or not. This is evident everywhere, but the following is a striking example. Here, Browning compares Guido's notion of life to the movement of tide.

I see you all reel to the rock, you waves—
Some forthright, some describe a sinuous track,
Some, crested brilliantly, with heads above,
Some in a strangled swirl sunk who knows how,
But all bound whither the main-cruent sets,
Rockward, an end in foam for all of you!
What if I be o'ertaken, pushed to the front
By all you crowding smoother souls behind,
And reach, a minute sooner than was meant,
The boundary whereon I break to mist? (XI, 2341-50)

These lines are spoken by Guido on the eve of his execution. "All run. Life is a torrent, and we are waves hastening to the rock, some sinking in a swirl, some twirling in a whirl, some straight, some turning, but all break into mist, who knows how and when. You all die; I go a moment ahead." It is hard to describe Guido's conception of life (quite an opposite to the poet's) more prettily and forcibly. This shows that Browning is eloquent, whether to expound his doctrine or to write on anything else.

What is the position of *The Ring and the Book* in Browning's works? With all its difficulties, the dramatic monologue is the form of poetry to which Browning, after abandoning his early attempt to achieve success on the stage, devoted practically the entire strength of his genius. Critics agree in saying that "*The Ring and the Book* holds the central position among Browning's works; its publication divides the poet's career into two periods: an earlier period of steady growth of fine accomplishment, and a later period of obvious poetic decay."⁹

⁸ Morley, John, *Studies in Literature*, p. 262.

⁹ Hudson, William A., *English Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 124.

After all, *The Ring and the Book* looms up before us as a great poem. We hesitate, though Arthur Symons¹⁰ does not, to say, that it must be ranked among the greatest poems in English literature, but we can say at least that the student of Browning had better know *The Ring and the Book*, to the best of his or her ability.

¹⁰ Symons, Arthur, *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*, p. 151.