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Unity Through Resonance:  
a study of the function of imagery  
in Browning's The Ring and the Book

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Presented to The Department of English for  
Honors, May 1, 1966

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## Chapter I

### The Problem

Browning has been more praised as a character analyst than as an integrator of his artistic materials. His favorite form, the dramatic monologue (in which a speaker reveals his personality through his speech), requires objectivity of the poet. He cannot intrude on his creatures to judge them; he must merely present them and let the reader evaluate them as he will. Indeed this negative capability has been held to be the hallmark of the dramatic genius. Browning's negative capability--his objectivity--is implied by his critics when they use images drawn from science to praise his skill as a dissector of character. For example, Swinburne said of Browning's presentation of Guido:

every nerve of the mind is touched by the patient scalpel, every vein and joint of the subtle and intricate spirit divided and laid bare.<sup>1</sup>

Guido is but one of ten characters who are sharply realized in their monologues comprising five-sixths of The Ring and the Book. Each of these monologues, if successful, should be able to stand as a unit complete in itself. This requirement poses a problem of integrating the independent components into a unified, aesthetically

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Arthur Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, (London, 1906), p. 157. Edward Berdoe makes a similar point using an almost identical image on p. 460 of his The Browning Cyclopaedia (London, 1892).



satisfying whole. Henry James considered it a problem which Browning failed to solve: the "various implications of interest" do not "converge and interfuse."<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, there are critics who praise Browning's unifying talent; they use weaving images to make their case, implying that the various threads of interest do interfuse to form a single fabric.<sup>2</sup>

These dissecting and weaving images define the limits of critical reaction to the issue of unity in Browning. This paper will discuss that issue as it relates to his magnum opus, The Ring and the Book.

There are several elements in the poem which help to unify it. One of these sources of unity is the frame into which the poet inserts the monologues. This frame, dealing with the poet's sources and his treatment of them--elucidating the relationship between fact and fancy--, comprises parts of the first and last books.

Another source of unity in the poem is its plot--an element much attacked, probably most colorfully by Carlyle:

all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting.<sup>3</sup>

His evaluation implies one of the chief objections to the poem: its simple story is told too many times. Yet the

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<sup>1</sup>Henry James, Notes on Novelists (New York, 1914), p. 394.

<sup>2</sup>Typical is W. O. Raymond, "The 'Jewelled Bow': a Study in Browning's Imagery and Humanism," PMLA, LXX (1955).

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in W. C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook, (New York, 1955), p. 346.

very retelling in each monologue of the same story serves to tie the books together--to make one poem of twelve. Symons makes this point--using a weaving image--when he says:

The effect of the reiterated story, told in some new fashion by each new teller of it, has been compared with that of a great fugue, blending, with the threads of its crossing and recrossing voices, a single web of harmony.<sup>1</sup>

Smith finds the source of The Ring and the Book's unity in the social judgment expressed in the poem. He equates social judgment with the "revelation of Man to men" and sees in it Browning's purpose in the poem.<sup>2</sup>

I feel that the poem's unity arises from a fourth source--its imagery. Several critics discuss Browning's use of images, but none focus their comments on the function of imagery as a unifying device. For example, Duffin speaks only tangentially of Browning's images:

Browning's poetry is very rich in metaphor, and only less rich in the simile. Moreover a reasonable proportion of his figures are genuinely illuminating, not merely descriptive and grow organically out of the subject. [We] understand as well as see.<sup>3</sup>

My point is that they are that which makes the subject organic. DeVane, Honan, and Smith imply as much, although they do not

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<sup>1</sup>Symons, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>C. W. Smith, Browning's Star-Imagery (Princeton, 1941), p. 193.

<sup>3</sup>H. C. Duffin, Amphibian: a Reconsideration of Browning (London, 1956), p. 274.

make precisely this point.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will direct itself to answering the question, How does imagery unify The Ring and the Book? The answer lies in the repeated use of images having the same subject. This reuse of familiar materials invites, nay, demands, comparison among their occurrences. Each new appearance of an image is qualified by its preceding uses: one's response to Pompilia's images is conditioned by the memory of an earlier response to Half-Rome's use of similar images. Honan mentions the cumulative effect of imagery and finds this technique particularly effective in The Ring and the Book.<sup>2</sup> Anne Stevenson, in another context, applies the term "resonance" to this cumulative effect--this accretion of meaning through reiteration--and the word is nicely suggestive.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the first task is to establish the fact that certain image subjects are significantly repeated in the poem--that a pattern of images exists. While I do this in the next chapter, I shall demonstrate the modifications conferred on an image by its prior uses. This illustrative chapter will be followed by one in which some general conclusions will be drawn concerning the function of imagery--what it does, its role--in the poem.

A definition of imagery is necessary as a clarifying and limiting device. Duffin uses this one: "the opposite of the

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<sup>1</sup>W. C. DeVane, "The Virgin and the Dragon," Yale Review, XXXVII (September, 1947-June, 1948), pp. 33-46, and C. W. Smith, op. cit., and Park Honan, Browning's Characters (New Haven, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>Honan, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Anne Stevenson, "The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop: Precision and Resonance," Shenandoah XVII, (Winter, 1966), 45-54.

plain way of making a statement."<sup>1</sup> Honan, in his provocative study of the techniques Browning uses to draw his characters, defines imagery more precisely "as figurative language--the word 'image' we may take to mean simply an instance of it."<sup>2</sup> The "precision" of this definition arises from the definitions which he quotes to introduce it. One of these is from C. Day Lewis, who says a poetic image "is a picture made out of words ...conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality."<sup>3</sup> I should like to expand this definition to include specific, and often solitary words. Honan implies this enlargement when he writes:

Words often carry something in addition to their denotative and even connotative meanings; and in spoken language the 'addition' may tend to reflect the speaker's state of mind. In the monologues this seems to be most obvious when the word has an imagistic effect.<sup>4</sup>

Smith says explicitly that "verbal association" (which he glosses as specific images suggested by word choice) tends to be "important to the production of imagistic effects."<sup>5</sup>

The pages that follow will deal with visual imagery and the diction that evokes it. The investigation of Chapter Two will lead, in Chapter Three, to conclusions which will call

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<sup>1</sup>Duffin, p. 284.

<sup>2</sup>Honan, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted, ibid., p. 170.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>Smith, p. 196.

into question received critical opinion--specifically, the evaluations of James and Carlyle and, generally, the judgments concerning unity and objectivity.

## Chapter II

### Theme and Variations

This chapter will advance evidence that a pattern of several related kinds of images exists in The Ring and the Book. Examples from this pattern should verify my assertion that imagery functions in the poem as a source of aesthetic unity. But before I present this evidence, I need to deal with a prior matter.

Browning conceives of man as a sum of three qualities or faculties, which he labels head, heart, and hand. Smith submits that the poet is "tortured...by the conflicts between these three."<sup>1</sup> Any "torture" must arise out of his recognition of the failure of the hand through weakness of the heart--or, what is the same thing to Browning, through the dominance of the head--for he firmly and consistently assigns precedence to hand and heart over head. The first two are complementary rather than antagonistic: the chief impetus to action (held to be a cardinal virtue and signified by hand) is the feelings, the province of the heart. Browning's robust nature would not tolerate the thoroughgoing impediment to action which intellectuality is, in his view. His belief in the decisive moment, the choice which determines a life, necessarily involves an abhorrence of anything that dampens ardor and hence retards the choice and mitigates its effects. The head, then, is the villain

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, p. 189.

of this scheme, which implicitly rests on the belief that Truth is more readily grasped intuitively than intellectually.

Raymond's statement is bold:

He does not merely hold that knowledge is relative and limited. Reason is forever baffled in its search for truth, and its quest ends in the cul-de-sac of deception and illusion. Its futile groping is, to use the poet's figure in The Ring and the Book, like an arm thrust into water, deflected by the medium through which it passes and falling wide of what it seeks to grasp.

But Browning's emotional gnosticism is as unqualified as his intellectual agnosticism. He cuts the Gordian knot by exalting the heart above the head and by regarding love as infallible in its intuitive perception of truth.<sup>1</sup>

Raymond suggests the important connection for Browning between the hand, symbolic of action, and truth. Browning's imagery, elucidating this connection, grows out of his fascination with the Andromeda myth--an example of the revelation of truth through action. He saw in the legend a mythic analogue of his own experience with Elizabeth Barrett, as well as of the story in the Old Yellow Book. Thus the simple, melodramatic plot was one of the facets of the story which Browning found most appealing. DeVane counts thirty appearances in The Ring and the Book of the Andromeda-Perseus myth and the story of Saint George and dragon.<sup>2</sup> Caponsacchi clearly plays Perseus-Saint George to Pompilia's Andromeda-dragon-threatened-lady, with Guido in the role of the dragon. Caponsacchi, "the courtly Canon"

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<sup>1</sup>W. O. Raymond, The Infinite Moment (Toronto, 1950), pp. 130-131.

<sup>2</sup>DeVane, p. 345.



(III, 842), combines the chivalric and religious nuances of the Saint George legend and hence is the ideal embodiment of it in terms more significant than those on the level merely of plot.<sup>1</sup> However, the major link between the legend and the poem is on the level of plot; and it is a link which Browning accentuates by changing the date of the priest's rescue of Pompilia to make it coincide with Saint George's Day.

The first mention in the poem of the myth appears in the initial telling of the story in "The Ring and the Book." After relating the departure of the Comparini for Rome, the poet describes the resultant situation in Arezzo in terms of black magic, with the Franceschini represented as votaries of the powers of darkness, as they

Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge  
From body and soul thus left them: all was sure,  
Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,  
The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?  
The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,  
Quenched lay their cauldron, covered i'the dust the crew,  
As, in a glory of armor like Saint George,  
Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest  
Bearing away the lady in his arms,  
Saved for a splendid minute and no more. (I, 573-82)

The Pope refers to Caponsacchi as "my warrior-priest" (X, 1091), and Pompilia calls him "O lover of my life, O soldier-saint" (VII, 1769). Her earlier allusion to the legend--

(Tisbe had told me that the slim young man  
With wings at head, and wings at feet, and sword  
Threatening a monster, in our tapestry,  
Would eat a girl else,--was a cavalier) (VII, 386-89)

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations from The Ring and the Book are taken from the twelve-volume edition of the Complete Works of Robert Browning, edited by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, New York: Fred DeFau and Company, 1898.



--reveals several important traits of her character. First, any trace of the esoteric in her diction or imagery is explained as information given her by one more experienced than she. She is describing her first meeting with Guido, whom Violante had represented as a cavalier. Pompilia expects such a being as the Perseus of the tapestry--her only previous acquaintance with a cavalier. That Guido is the dragon instead is terribly ironic. But Pompilia is unaware of any irony. She simply points out the discrepancy between her expectations and her realizations, not between her deserts and her rewards. The unconscious nature of her irony is revealed by her ingenuous syntax, which inserts the homely detail ("in our tapestry") into what should, strictly speaking, be pure description.<sup>1</sup> The effect is gentle, winning, "poignant, overpowering in tenderness and pathos."<sup>2</sup>

A more consciously ironic treatment of the Saint George legend is Caponsacchi's before his Judges, against whom the irony is bitingly directed. Throughout the monologue he has vigorously and pointedly reminded the Bench of its earlier levity and light regard for what it chose to view as an escapade, and in judgment of which it handed

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<sup>1</sup>I am aware of the nearly circular argument (Pompilia is innocent because her syntax is ingenuous, and one notices the simple syntax because of the aura of her simplicity), but I know of no better way to progress than from the general impression to the details which first helped, however intuitively, to establish that impression.

<sup>2</sup>Ethel Colburn Mayne, Browning's Heroines (London, 1913), p. 158.

down an indecisive verdict. After the resultant tragedy,  
its tune has changed:

I rise in your esteem, sagacious Sirs,  
Stand up a renderer of reasons, not  
The officious priest would personate Saint George  
For a mock Princess in undragoned days.  
What, the blood startles you? What, after all  
The priest who needs must carry sword on thigh  
May find imperative use for it? Then, there was  
A Princess, was a dragon belching flame,  
And should have been a Saint George also? Then,  
There might be worse schemes than to break the bonds  
At Arezzo, lead her by the little hand,  
Till she reached Rome, and let her try to live? (VI,  
1742-53)

The penultimate version of the Andromeda myth is  
delivered by Guido at his trial, where he likens his  
suffering at the hands of the Comparini to this story:

One of us Franceschini fell long since  
I' the Holy Land, betrayed tradition runs,  
To Paynims by the feigning of a girl  
He rushed to free from ravisher, and found  
Lay safe enough with friends in ambuscade  
Who flayed him while she clapped her hands and laughed:  
Let me end, falling by a like device. (V, 1412-18)

This, obviously is a travesty, a total perversion of the  
myth: Perseus betrayed by Andromeda, the dragon become the  
victim. This perverted use of the standard image brilliantly  
places Guido in the ranks of the Opposition to the forces  
of good--Pempilia, Caponsacchi, the Pope. This passage is  
relevant in terms of the larger theme of the poem (as  
opposed to the theme of rescue, which is intimately connected  
with plot)--the theme of the only relative truthfulness of  
human expression, the poem's "message." Each of the above-  
quoted speakers uses the legend for his own purposes, but

only Guido alters it fundamentally. When one remembers that he is fighting for his life by presenting—through inverted images, among other means—a completely false picture of himself, the problem of truth becomes extremely complex. The minor theme of rescue is linked to the major theme of truth precisely through the Andromeda legend. The Pope operates in the poem as a second Saint George:

we see Pompilia rescued from the dragon Guido  
by Caponsacchi in the first instance; and later  
when truth or ultimate justice [as opposed to the  
physical body] is endangered, Pope Innocent  
comes to save it.<sup>1</sup>

As the villain of the melodrama—the dragon of the legend—Guido is characterized as the thinker, the intellectual. His niche in the tripartite schematization I have made of Browning's thought is the one labeled "head." Cook calls him the "highly educated and intellectual villain of the poem"<sup>2</sup> and maintains that as such he was a creation of Browning—a matter of fancy, not fact. (This would indicate that perhaps Browning intended that distinctions like those that follow be made in the reader's mind.) Guido is never presented as active: he plans; others execute. Consequently his associations with the hand do not symbolize action, and this absence of the normal symbolic value of the hand accentuates the twisted quality of Guido's personality. His description of his

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<sup>1</sup>William Clyde DeVane, "The Virgin and the Dragon," Yale Review, XXXVII (September, 1947), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Kemball Cook, A Commentary upon Browning's The Ring and the Book (London, 1920), p. 237.

plight on the morning of Pompilia's escape will serve as an illustration of this principle. He has awakened at noon from a sleep which he says was induced by a poison given him by his wife, but this is probably an excuse for his delay in pursuing her (both delay and excuse being part of his larger plan to drive Pompilia into the sort of folly which will rid him of wife and win him her dowry). He says that after partially recovering from the effects of the poison, he was urged to pursue the runaways:

Then, set on horseback and bid seek the lost,  
I started alone, head of me, heart of me  
Fire, and each limb as languid... (V, 1036-38)

His representation of himself as considerably weakened by his wife's treachery, yet with valor undaunted, is completely false and perfectly in keeping with the mask he wants to show the Court. In the totality of the poem, the irony works against him, for he is shown to be essentially a man of languid limbs. He demonstrates this by his cowardice at Castelnuovo, where he is taken aback at finding an armed cavalier rather than a frocked priest as his adversary. He makes no attempt at physical vengeance but turns his cause over to the Law, which functions, in the poem, as a symbol of the frustration, the perverted truth, the inactivity of the intellectual life. The myth of the Law is the converse of that of Saint George. Even Half-Rome, in trying to justify Guido's dependence on Law, offers a rather damaging dialogue between the two. Law responds to the accusation

that it did not act with enough force in Guido's behalf by noting that Guido, who was anxious to grasp honor in the person of his runaway wife, chose not to grasp either, but merely to touch both with his fingertip. Why should Law do his job for him?

["] Law, alien to the actor whose warm blood  
Asks heat from law whose veins run lukewarm milk,--  
What you dealt lightly with, shall law make out  
Heinous forsooth?" (II, 1505-08)

When his honor must be avenged, he goes for help.

Thus he is firmly associated with the head; he is the planner. Yet even his planning is deficient: he forgets to secure the pass which would have enabled him and his accomplices to escape from Rome. He justifies his capture in these terms:

Gives me some twenty miles of miry road  
More to march in the middle of that night  
Whereof the rough beginning taxed the strength  
O'the youngsters, much more mine, both soul and flesh,  
Who had to think as well as act: (XI, 1646-50)

Yet we have seen that he neither planned nor executed well. Moreover, the really telling reason for his fatigue is his age, a fact which he implies, only to deny. Now the Pope's association of Guido with the wolf (violence) and Paolo with the fox (craft) becomes clear. Guido is violent in a cowardly way, and Paolo is eminently shrewd. When violence becomes the only conceivable course, he absconds, leaving matters in Guido's less than perfectly capable hands.

Contrarily, Caponsacchi is chiefly associated with the realm of the hand, but is excluded from neither the realm of the heart or that of the head. For example, the speaker of "Tertium Quid" reports Caponsacchi's version of the understanding between himself and Pompilia:

And at this one and only interview,  
 He saw the sole and single course to take--  
 Bade her dispose of him, head, heart and hand,  
 Did her behest and braved the consequence,  
 Not for the natural end, the love of man  
 For woman whether love be virtue or vice,  
 But, please you, altogether for pity's sake--  
 Pity of innocence and helplessness! (IV, 984-91)

The sneer implicit in "But, please you" should be read as evidence of Tertium Quid's partial perception of the truth rather than as evidence of Caponsacchi's partial veracity. However, the passage does indicate the source of action, that which prompts the hand--love.

This relationship in Caponsacchi between heart and hand is tellingly observed by Herford, who would have supported Raymond's contention about Browning's "emotional gnosticism" up to a point: he would not agree that Browning had unqualified faith in the heart, but would agree that he believed in the greater efficacy for Good of the emotions than of the intellect. He points out that Caponsacchi's first reaction to Pompilia's request for aid is delay and indecision. The "warrior-priest" tries to justify this inaction in intellectual terms--through the conventional idea that a priest is forbidden to love anyone but the Church, to whom he owes ultimate duty and obedience. But then he realizes that God needs life as well



as death and that self-sacrifice in a vital cause is the ultimate good. That this is a rational-intuitive realization allows Herford to maintain that Caponsacchi's basis for action is emotional.<sup>1</sup> Instructive is the contrast between Caponsacchi's resolution and the irresolution of that monk who agrees to write a letter to her parents for Pompilia, but who, after stopping to think, does not:

The good friar  
Promised as much at the moment; but, alack,  
Night brings discretion: (III, 1023-25)

Moreover, Caponsacchi does not act to appease public judgment: the unavoidable scandal can do no service to either himself or Pompilia. Yet he values heart above head and can act. To Browning, discretion is not the better part of valor--neither quantitatively nor qualitatively.

Pompilia shares Caponsacchi's spirit. Professor Whitla notes, "Pompilia, in the moment of critical choice, decides on the basis of love, the surest foundation of truth."<sup>2</sup> To her, Caponsacchi embodies truth. Smith notes that she identifies Caponsacchi with truth, and goes on to say that "the Pope, who is wiser in his judgments, does not identify Caponsacchi with truth, but merely with good as opposed to evil intentions."<sup>3</sup> First, Caponsacchi is essentially an

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Harold Herford, Robert Browning (London, 1905), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup>William Whitla, The Central Truth (Toronto, 1963), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, p. 207.

actor, a doer. His peculiar excellence in the poem (his virtu) is his ability to translate intentions into accomplishments. To relegate him to a class of "intenders" which would include Pompilia's weak-hearted letter-"writer" is palpably unfair. Moreover, the Pope does associate his warrior-priest with the star of truth. He must do so if his position is to be tenable. How could he pronounce Pompilia "perfect in whiteness" (X, 1001) and call her "my rose, I gather for the breast of God" (X, 1042), and not condone, or perhaps even praise, her rescuer? And praise he does, although not without reservation. He first chides Caponsacchi for his attempt to mediate the secular and ecclesiastical worlds--for being a "courtly Canon,"--but then commends

the healthy rage,--  
When the first moan broke from the martyr-maid  
At that uncaging of the beasts,--made bare  
My athlete on the instant, gave such good  
Great undisguised leap over post and pale  
Right into the mid-cirque, free fighting-place.  
There may have been rash stripping--every rag  
Went to the winds,--infringement manifold  
Of laws prescribed pudicity, I fear,  
In this impulsive and prompt self-display!  
Ever such tax comes of the foolish youth;  
Men mulct the wiser manhood, and suspect  
No veritable star swims out of cloud.  
Bear thou such imputation, undergo  
The penalty I nowise dare relax,--  
Conventional chastisement and rebuke.  
But for the outcome, the brave starry birth  
Conciliating earth with all that cloud,  
Thank heaven as I do! (X, 1133-51)

Smith reads the image as "a symbol of the heavenly truth that he [the Pope] urges Caponsacchi to see."<sup>1</sup> I

<sup>1</sup>Smith, p. 208.



agree that the Pope does not regard Caponsacchi as the embodiment of the white light of perfect Truth which he himself glimpses and perhaps even expresses in his Book. But I would nonetheless maintain that the above-quoted passage from "The Pope," which Smith uses to support his statement, does not in fact support it. I read the "stripping" or "baring" images as symbolic of a banishment of conventional criteria. Caponsacchi is pictured as a thing of purity obscured by the cloud of the conventional punishment inflicted by the law courts. He will emerge from his relegation purified of complicity in a necessary folly. Yet, paradoxically, it is that very relegation which first imputed guilt to a guiltless man and thus necessitated the purgation it accomplishes. The Pope comes close to conventional public opinion when he says that the relegation must stand. But this is similarity with a difference: the penalty is to conciliate the world of men who mete out punishment, yet who do not realize the effects of their punishment--the starry birth which will serve as an example to them. Thus the Pope sees in Caponsacchi a symbol of the truth--a symbol which men can read; not, indeed, a symbol of the Truth available only to God and a very wise old Pope, who, incidentally, evaluates the priest not as Pope, but as Antonio Pignatelli, a man like other men. He regards Caponsacchi as a symbol of a particularly humanistic, and hence vital, truth. Parts of that truth are Caponsacchi's activity--"impulsive and prompt"--and its spur--emotion. The greater Saint Geroge sees in the lesser a paradigm for human behavior, the virtues of action based on love.

Caponsacchi acts to save Pompilia. His action--his role as Saint George--is repeatedly suggested by the association with him of imagery dealing with the hand. This hand imagery is one facet of a larger issue--the connections among theme, plot, and imagery. I have linked the theme of action through love with the plot of rescue. This connection finds its "objective correlative" in the Andromeda myth. The further link remains to be made between those two and the imagistic changes rung on them.

I have called the plot of The Ring and the Book melodramatic in its simplicity. It is, essentially, a story of plight, rescue, and retribution. The first two movements of this simple plot find an archetypal analogue in the Andromeda legend. Now melodrama might be described as the archetypal reduced to the commonplace. My task is to find, in the twelve discussions of the commonplace which comprise The Ring and the Book, imagistic echoes of the archetypal--the variations on the theme.

#### Variation 1 Limits and their Violation

In several of the preceding quotations from the poem, Pompilia is pictured as being in the center of an enclosure through which Caponsacchi must break to save her. Moreover, his violation of these limits on her freedom is usually associated with an image of the hand. In the first of these citations from the poem, Saint George cleaves the obscene ring traced around Pompilia; in the third, Caponsacchi breaks

her bonds and leads her by the hand to Rome; in the eighth the savior leaps over a wall into the center of an arena to do battle for the sufferer. These suggest the existence of an image pattern elucidating plot and theme. I shall offer further evidence that such a pattern exists.

Tertium Quid describes the Comparini as

the burgess-family which, wealthy enough,  
 And comfortable to heart's desire, yet crouched  
 Outside a gate to heaven,--locked, bolted, barred,  
 Whereof Count Guido had a key he kept  
 Under his pillow, but Pompilia's hand  
 Might slide behind his neck and pilfer thence.  
 The key was fairy; its mere mention made  
 Violante feel the thing shoot one sharp ray  
 That reached the womanly heart: so--"I assent!  
 Yours be Pompilia, hers and ours that key  
 To all the glories of the greater life! " (IV, 477-86)

They desire their daughter to marry above her station; they want to cross social barriers, to violate class limits. Their motive is pride, the quality the Greeks termed hybris, from the concept that all earthly and heavenly territory had been parcelled out to the gods, and that man, by living, trespassed on godly territory. The Comparini are guilty, in a literal sense, of hybris.

## I

Archangelis, in composing a brief in defense of Guido, ponders how best to phrase the fact that Guido married. He considers the phrase, "In stable bond of marriage bound his own" (VIII, 131). The poet, standing on his balcony at Casa Guidi, looks across the night toward Arezzo, imagines the story, and sees Pompilia trapped inside Guido's evil:

These [Guido's brothers] who had rolled the starlike  
 pest to Rome  
 And stationed it to suck up and absorb  
 The sweetness of Pompilia, rolled again  
 That bloated bubble, with her soul inside  
 Back to Arezzo and a palace there-- (I, 548-53)

Pompilia, referring to the strangeness of her situation after her marriage, speaks of herself as isolated from humanity and aid:

These strange woes stole on tiptoe, as it were,  
 Into my neighborhood and privacy,  
 Sat down where I sat, laid them where I lay;  
 When friends broke in, held up a torch and cried  
 "Why, you Pompilia in the cavern thus,  
 How comes that arm of yours about a wolf?  
 And the soft length,--lies in and out your feet  
 And laps you round the knee,--a snake it is!" (VII,  
 188-26)

She was "cut off sheer from every natural aid" (IV, 714).

The poet uses a similar image of isolation to describe the conditions which made the Comparini flee Arezzo:

[[ ] As confident of capture, all took hands  
 And danced about the captives in a ring)  
 --Saw them break through, breathe safe, at Rome again,  
 Saved by the selfish instinct, losing so  
 Their loved one left with haters. These I saw  
 In recrudescency of baffled hate,  
 Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge  
 From body and soul thus left them[.] (I, 567-74)

"Recrudescency," meaning the breaking out again of morbid or dangerous activity, reinforces the idea of escape with which the passage deals. The imprisoning Franceschini are painted as monsters and fiends, yet are given hands, suggesting a human context and creating a paradoxical situation of hunted

turned hunter. Yet the Comparini are saved by an animalistic virtue--the instinct of self-preservation. Their escape allows Pompilia to hope that they will rescue her, and she asks the friar to write for her to tell them of this hope. Tertium Quid reports that the friar temporarily agreed to

Let her dictate her letter in such a sense  
That parents, to save breaking down a wall,  
Might lift her over: she went back heaven in heart.  
(IV, 816-18)

The wall is ambiguous: it represents both Pompilia's life and the threats to that life. The action of lifting her over a wall is highly significant in terms of the connection between theme and image. Yet Pietro and Violante do not help her, because the friar never writes the letter. But Pompilia does not know this fact and explains their silence to Caponsacchi, who repeats her words to his Judges:

Either they give no credit to the tale,  
Or else, wrapped wholly up in their own joy  
Of such escape, they care not who cries, still  
I' the clutches. Anyhow, no word arrives. (VI, 840-43)

Pietro and Violante are "sheathed," protected, calloused by their joy at their own escape.

But what of the details of Guido's treatment of Pompilia? What precisely turned the palace at Arezzo into a cage? The Comparini offer this explanation:

They also say, to keep her straight therein,  
All sort of torture was piled, pain on pain,  
On either side Pompilia's path of life,  
Built round about and over against by fear,

Circumvallated month by month, and week  
 By week, and day by day, and hour by hour,  
 Close, closer and yet closer still with pain,  
 No outlet from the encroaching pain save just  
 Where stood one saviour like a piece of heaven,  
 Hell's arms would strain round but for this blue gap.  
 She, they say further, first tried every chink,  
 Every imaginable break i' the fire,  
 As way of escape: (IV, 781-93)

Her pleas to the officials of Arezzo have brought her no succour. The repetition of the lines gives a superb sense of the oppressiveness of this torture, of its confining qualities, its imprisonment. Such words as "circumvallated" (meaning surrounded by a rampart, "enwalled") add to the impression. Also the "straight" of l. 781 operates as a pun on "strait," which has the archaic meaning of "narrow, restricted," and the modern definition of "distressful." In contrast, the color blue is frequently associated with escape, as, for instance, in Other Half-Rome's comments on Pompilia's miraculously extended life and his speculations on its cause:

whether, because earth was hell to her,  
 By compensation, when the blackness broke  
 She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool blue,  
 To show her for a moment such things were,-- (III, 14-17)

This echoes the "Prince of the Power of the Air" passage (ll. 588-96) in Book I where Guido is linked with Satan and is called the black cloud that shades happiness and obscures truth.

In Arezzo, Guido does not torment his wife gratuitously: he addresses himself to the task of forcing her to commit an indiscretion that will leave him unwived but not un-



dowried. Other Half-Rome offers this comment on Guido's scheme:

Accordingly did Guido set himself  
 To worry up and down, across, around,  
 The woman, hemmed in by her household-bars--  
 Chase her about the coop of daily life,  
 Having first stopped each outlet thence save one  
 Which, like bird with a ferret in her haunt,  
 She needs must seize as sole way of escape  
 Though there was tied and twittering a decoy  
 To seem as if it tempted,--just the plume  
 O' the popinjay, not a real respite there  
 From tooth and claw of something in the dark,--  
 Giuseppe Caponsacchi. (III, 774-785)

The ferret, a weasel-like animal which drives his prey from its own lair into the open where he can catch it, is clearly equivalent to Guido, who is flushing Pompilia from her lair. The poet makes these implications explicit as he imagines

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 [.]. (I, 495-98)

Not only does Guido cage Pompilia, he uses her as bait in his trap to catch Caponsacchi and thus implement his total plan. Caponsacchi realizes that the letters, purportedly from Pompilia, are really a part of her husband's plot. When Guido writes, in his wife's name, that the priest is to ignore her pleas for help and her protestations of love, because her husband has forbidden him to walk past their house where she will be waiting to see him, Caponsacchi retorts that the street is public. He passes the Franceschini palace that evening expecting to be ambushed by the Count and his servants, but is surprised to find Pompilia in her window.

When she sees him in the street below, she immediately withdraws. He reflects that the Count has stationed her in the window on the pretext of watching an innocent diversion, but with the actual purpose of using her as a lure to catch himself:

She never dreams they used her for a snare,  
And now withdraw the bait has served its turn. (VI,  
703-04)

Pompilia herself comes to recognize her victimized status and victimizing functions in the Franceschini household, as is indicated by this passage:

My husband used to seem to harm me, not . . .  
Not on pretence he punished sin of mine,  
Nor for sin's sake and lust of cruelty,  
But as I heard him bid a farming-man  
At the villa take a lamb once to the wood  
And there ill-treat it, meaning that the wolf  
Should hear its cries, and so come, quick be caught,  
Enticed to the trap: he practised thus with me  
That so, whatever were his gain thereby,  
Others than I might become prey and spoil. (VI, 1336-45)

It is this realization of the harm dealt to others through her that prompts her to flee Arezzo.

Tertium Quid uses the same imagery to defend Guido against the charge that he planned for Pompilia to use Caponsacchi to escape:

Would Guido make a terror of the man  
He meant should tempt the woman, as they charge?  
Do you fright your hare that you may catch your hare?  
(IV, 911-13)



Guido is interested in trapping other things than Caponsacchi, however, and the association of the Count with the trap is more general than the three previous examples indicate. Guido calls himself a trap in these lines from his second monologue where he speaks of the Comparini:

these, forsooth,  
Tried whisker-plucking, and so found what trap  
The whisker kept perdue, two rows of teeth--  
Sharp, as too late the prying fingers felt. (XI, 1185-88)

He had earlier made a revealing statement about his decision to leave Rome and the service of the Church:

I am tired: Arezzo's air is good to breathe;  
Vittiano,--one limes flocks of thrushes there; (V,  
362-63)

Of course the lines mean that the cost of living is lower in the country than in the city, but the method of acquiring the cheaper game is trapping rather than some other form of hunting. The Pope points out the trapper in Guido as he describes the Count's reaction to the Court judgments after Castelnuovo:

Since fowlers hawk, shoot, nay and snare the game,  
And yet eschew vile practice, nor find sport  
In torch-light treachery or the luring owl.

But how hunts Guido? Why, the fraudulent trap--  
Late spurned to ruin by the indignant feet  
Of fellows in the chase who loved fair play--  
Here he picks up the fragments to the least,  
Lades him and hies to the old lurking-place  
Where haply he may patch again, refit  
The mischief, file its blunted teeth anew,  
Make sure, next time, first snap shall break the bone.  
(X, 719-29)

## II

But the cage is just one subject in this first development of the variation. Less specific, but no less significant, is the enclosure image in this passage from "Tertium Quid":

Then the grim arms stretched yet a little more  
 And each touched each, all but one streak i' the midst,  
 Whereat stood Caponsacchi, who cried, "This way,  
 Out by me! Heistate one moment more  
 And the fire shuts out me and shuts in you!  
 Here my hand holds you life out!" Whereupon  
 She clasped the hand, which closed on hers and drew  
 Pompilia out o' the circle now complete. (IV, 836-43)

Caponsacchi, of course, provides the rescuing hand. The turning point in his life is his decisive action in aid of Pompilia. But the genesis of that act is his first glimpse of her in the theatre. After that occasion he thinks of her:

And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help,--  
 And yet there was no way in the wide world  
 To stretch out mine and so relieve myself,-- (VI, 492-  
 94)

He is hamstrung by his hybrid position, by his attempt to be both worldling and priest. He is allowed the foolishness of foppery without any of its rewards. That glimpse of Pompilia suffices to show him the barrenness of his situation.

Pompilia is seized by an analogous realization after the theatre:

So I said "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!  
 I have a keeper in the garden here  
 Whose sole employment is to strike me low  
 If ever I, for solace, seek the sun. (VII, 991-96)

Here she repeats Tertium Quid's depiction of her salvation as a lifting over walls guarded by keeper Guido. It is noteworthy that Pompilia, reflecting gratefully after the fact on Caponsacchi's service, couches her earlier hope for rescue in terms of a saving hand, mentioned thrice in two lines:

My hope, that came in answer to the prayer,  
 Some hand would interpose and save me--hand  
 Which proved to be my friend's hand: and, -- blest bliss, --  
 That fancy which began so faint at first,  
 That thrill of dawn's suffusion through my dark,  
 Which I perceive was promise of my child,  
 The light his unborn face sent long before,--  
 God's way of breaking the good news to flesh. (VII,  
 613-20)

Moreover, she expresses the revelation of her pregnancy ("dawn's suffusion through my dark") in terms of limits and their violation: the broken syntax of the first line does "violence" to the language and conveys a sense of breathless excitement; the flies crossing the sunbeam could be said to be violating limits demarked by light; the word "motes" suggests a pun on "moat" to suggest her encircled, isolated situation; her sleep is "pierced":

When, what, first thing at daybreak, pierced the sleep  
 With a summons to me? Up I sprang alive,  
 Light in me, light without me, everywhere  
 Change! A broad yellow sunbeam was let fall  
 From heaven to earth,--a sudden drawbridge lay,  
 Along which marched a myriad merry motes,  
 Mocking the flies that crossed them and recrossed  
 In rival dance, companions new-born too. (VII, 1211-18)

Caponsacchi, the means whereby Pompilia will violate the limits crushing and imprisoning her, mentions his hand in the first image he speaks. That figure is part of a large pattern of "obscuration" images such as clouds, fog, and blots which hide truth. Thus these images support the major theme of the poem. To the extent that the plot could be called lurid, they also support the minor theme of rescue. A certain class of these obscuration images will be dealt with later; the relevance of the following passage to the present discussion lies in the use of the hand image, although Caponsacchi's inability to perceive his hand in the Court perhaps signifies the disguising of the truth of his action by that implement of the intellect, the Law. He asks of his Judges,

Have patience? In this sudden smoke from hell,--  
 So things disguise themselves,--I cannot see  
 My own hand held thus broad before my face  
 And know it again. Answer you? (VI, 2-5)

Before Caponsacchi can use his hand, before he can act to save Pompilia, before he can break the bonds that torture her, he must break some bonds of his own. He describes Pompilia's effect on him as an invasion to which he lay passive (VI, 932). Now this is a sexual image, but its primary import is not sexual. Indeed the whole notion of violating limits can be seen as sexual, but to attribute to them a principal denotative meaning of sexuality (for example to support the claim that Caponsacchi and Pompilia are lovers in the poem) is to misread the poem, and misuse the image pattern. Browning believed Pompilia to be pure, and presents her as such. The experience

Caponsacchi describes is new, "virginal," and to that extent his expression of the experience can be considered sexual. But the emphasis should properly be on the novelty of the experience rather than on the libidinous expression of that experience. The priest obviously loves the woman he saves, but Bottini's intimations of a seduction in the carriage or at Castelnuovo, are fictitious slurs which damage his character in the poem, not the characters of the hero and heroine. Caponsacchi's experience is novel because thought is inapplicable to the problem it poses. He says he acted out of a non-intellectual motive:

I have thought sometimes, and thought long and hard.  
I have stood before, gone round a serious thing,  
Tasked my whole mind to touch and clasp it close,  
As I stretch forth my arm to touch this bar. (VI, 923-26)

It is curious that Caponsacchi, who breaks a circle in rescuing Pompilia, should conceive of his action as not arising out of thought, which he images circularly. He presents the canonical restrictions on him in terms which recall the encircled, trapped Pompilia:

Through each familiar hindrance of the day  
Did I make steadily for its hour and end,--  
Felt time's old barrier-growth of right and fit  
Give way through all its twines, and let me go. (VI,  
1107-10)

He sheds these restrictions, breaks his own personal circle, escapes the trap of convention, in order that he may help Pompilia out of her trap, her circle. The Pope suggests this violence to restraints when he says of Caponsacchi:

He has danced, in gayety of heart, i' the main  
 The right step through the maze we bade him foot.  
 But if his heart had prompted him break loose  
 And mar the measure? Why, we must submit,  
 And thank the chance that brought him safe so far. (X,  
 1910-11)

Caponsacchi never was submissive to enclosure: he undertook his priesthood with the understanding that his role would be less to reinforce the wall of the Church than to embellish it:

That building of the buttress-work was done  
 By martyrs and confessors: let it bide,  
 Add not a brick, but, where you see a chink,  
 Stick in a sprig of ivy or root a rose  
 Shall make amends and beautify the pile! (X, 291-95)

Caponsacchi, impatient of enclosures, helps Pompilia out of hers. This rescue is, as I have shown, associated with hand imagery. Pompilia herself consistently uses hand imagery to talk of Caponsacchi's salvation of her. She says (VII, 1773) that her weak hand is strong for being clasped in his strong hand. Three hundred lines earlier she utters this encomium:

"Oh, to have Caponsacchi for my guide!"  
 Ever the face upturned to mine, the hand  
 Holding my hand across the world,-- (VII, 1480-82)

Even Fra Celestino uses the image of the hand as an instrument of salvation when, in his sermon, which Bottini transcribes in his letter in "The Book and the Ring," he asks:

How many chaste and noble sister-fames  
 Wanted the extricating hand, so lie  
 Strangled, for one Pompilia proud above  
 The welter, plucked from the world's calumny,  
 Stupidity, simplicity,--who cares? (XII, 484-88)



Pompilia thus describes her feelings on entering the first town along their route of escape from Arezzo:

I saw the old boundary and wall o' the world  
 Rise plain as ever round me, hard and cold,  
 As if the broken circlet joined again,  
 Tightened itself about me with no break,--  
 As if the town would turn Arezzo's self,-- (VII, 1530-34)

And indeed her feeling is a premonition; the circle does close again--at Castelnuovo.

### III

At this stage of the story a new subject within the first variation appears. The Pope speaks admiringly of Caponsacchi:

How does he lay about him in the midst,  
 Strike any foe, right wrong at any risk, (X, 1554-55)

Here the picture is not of the priest piercing an enclosure, either from within or without, but of the priest as the cynosure surrounded by subsidiary beings. Caponsacchi himself paints this picture when he speaks of his position at Castelnuovo:

On either idle hand of me there stood  
 Really an officer, nor laughed i' the least: (VI,  
 1475-76)

He is constrained, he cannot wield his saving hand. But now the roles are reversed: Pompilia acts to save her savior. She speaks of her motive in these terms:

But when at last, all by myself I stood  
 Obeying the clear voice which bade me rise,  
 Not for my own sake but my babe unborn,  
 And take the angel's hand was sent to help--

And found the old adversary athwart the path--  
 Not my hand simply struck from the angel's, but  
 The very fiend who struck there,--that I would not bear,  
 That only I resisted! (VII, 1598-1606)

Two facts are noteworthy: she stands alone, and she attacks her husband because of her feeling for Caponsacchi. She remains strong enough, even after her hand has been struck from the priest's, to act decisively and without reflection. She later remarks:

All was against the combat: vantage, mine?  
 The runaway avowed, the accomplice-wife,  
 In company with the plan-contriving priest?  
 Yet, shame thus rank and patent, I struck, bare,  
 At foe from head to foot in magic mail,  
 And off it withered, cobweb-armory  
 Against the lightning! 'T was truth singed the lies  
 And saved me, not the vain sword nor weak speech! (VII,  
 1618-25)

Here she images Guido as sheathed in lies. Sheaths protect the thing they encase and Guido's lies protect him. The Fisco echoes this idea. He has no great belief in Pompilia's virtue, but he presents it as Exhibit A whenever it suits his purpose. Here is an example of the use of that Exhibit, the force of which is severely limited by the "perhaps" of l. 884:

But virtue, barred, still leaps the barrier, lords!  
 --Still, moon-like, penetrates the encroaching mist  
 And bursts, all broad and bare, on night, ye know!  
 Surprised, then, in the garb of truth, perhaps,  
 Pompilia, thus opposed, breaks obstacle,  
 Springs to her feet, and stands Thalassian-pure,  
 Confronts the foe,--nay, catches at his sword  
 And tries to kill the intruder, he complains. (IX, 881-88)

Bottini's speech recalls the motifs of breaking through an enclosure and of obscuration. Berdoe suggests that "Thalassian-



pure" refers to Thalassius, a handsome Roman for whom the soldiers took great care to find, keep, and present a pure Sabine woman.<sup>1</sup> Half-Rome's version of the episode is similar:

She woke, saw, sprang upright  
I' the midst and stood as terrible as truth,  
Sprang to her husband's side, caught at the sword  
That hung there useless,--since they held each hand  
O' the lover, had disarmed him properly,--  
And in a moment out flew the bright thing  
Full in the face of Guido: (II, 1021-27)

Pompilia is presented as erect--the unsheathed sword, the husked kernel of truth. It is Caponsacchi who is surrounded, unarmed, sheathed by the bystanders. When he tells the story, he emphasizes the sheathing of Pompilia by her husband's partisans, the pathetic vanquishing of Good by Evil:

She sprang at the sword that hung beside him, seized,  
Drew, brandished it, the sunrise burned for joy  
O' the blade, "Die," cried she, "devil, in God's name!"  
Ah, but they all closed round her, twelve to one  
--The unmanly men, no woman-mother made,  
Spawned somehow! Dead-white and disarmed she lay. (VI,  
1518-23)

Clearly these images of enclosure--of traps, circles, walls, sheaths--operate negatively on the level of plot reinforcement. They represent forces which must be overcome, obstacles which must be surpassed, limits imposed by Evil which must be violated by Good if It is to survive. The images of the sword and of the hand that wields it are the positive aspects of the pattern, which two final passages,

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Berdoe, The Browning Cyclopedia (London, 1892), p. 433.

both dealing in their ways with the outcome of the flight,  
illustrate. Caponsacchi says to the Court,

You did so far give sanction to our flight,  
Confirm its purpose, as lend helping hand,  
Deliver up Pompilia not to him  
She fled, but those the flight was ventured for. (VI,  
1817-20)

The Law substitutes debate for action, replaces heart and  
hand with head, with the result that Pompilia is barely alive.  
Some thirty lines from the end of her monologue, she imagines  
what Caponsacchi would have said if he indeed had been her  
visitor on the night which brought Guido and murder instead:

"My great heart, my strong hand are back again!"  
I would have sprung to these, beckoning across  
Murder and hell gigantic and distinct  
O' the threshold, posted to exclude me heaven: (VII,  
1793-96)

She imagines hell and murder as a wall, a limit, a boundary  
(threshold) interposed between her and Caponsacchi across  
which she must be lifted, willingly, by and to her heaven.

Such is the first variation; but it has its own development  
before the appearance of the second. This development is  
dual: first, of the sheath as protection instead of adversary;  
second, of the images as they are perverted by the agents  
of Evil. This latter issue is of dimensions large enough  
to constitute a separate variation on the theme, but its  
component images are dependent, for their full force, upon  
the pattern of Variation 1, and cannot be divorced from it.

## IV

The passage from Pompilia's monologue where she represents Guido as protected or sheathed by the fabric of his lies suggests the kind of working in two directions which is typical of Browning's imagery. Guido is befriended by precisely those things which form the enclosure so inimical to his wife. The Pope speaks of Guido's clerical disguise which he doffs and dons at will:

Armor he boasts when a wave breaks on beach,  
 Or bird stoops for the prize: with peril nigh,--  
   \* \* \*  
 Do tides abate and sea-fowl hunt i' the deep?  
 Already is the slug from out its mew,  
 Ignobly faring with all loose and free,  
 Sand-fly and slush-worm at their garbage-feast,  
 A naked blotch no better than they all:  
 Guido has dropped nobility, slipped the Church,  
 Plays trickster if not cut-purse, body and soul  
 Prostrate among the filthy feeders--faugh!  
 And when Law takes him by surprise at last,  
 Catches the foul thing on its carrion-prey,  
 Behold, he points to shell left high and dry,  
 Pleads "But the case out yonder is myself!" (X, 489-506)

The word "mew" means "concealment" or "den" and comes from the name applied to the cage where hawks are kept, especially while they are mewing (molting). Thus the diction, with its connotations of shedding a covering of little worth, reinforces the idea of the passage. The imagery is used pejoratively clearly to identify Guido with evil. The Pope later speaks of Guido's family as the same kind of sheath for him which his clericality and his lies are. The diction is from those familiar associations of the Count with animals and black magic:

Such I find Guido, midmost blotch of black  
 Discernible in this group of clustered crimes  
 Huddling together in the cave they call  
 Their palace outraged day thus penetrates.  
 Around him ranged now close and now remote,  
 Prominent or obscure to meet the needs  
 O' the mage and master, I detect each shape  
 Subsidiary i' the scene nor loathed the less,  
 All alike colored, all descried akin  
 By one and the same pitchy furnace stirred  
 At the centre: see, they lick the master's hand,--  
 (X, 865-75)

The association of Pompilia with the protection of the sheath does not carry with it overtones of disapproval, and is part of the larger pattern of plant imagery which helps to characterize her. Other Half-Rome makes an extended development of the sheath image, concentrating on the picture of a delicate plant protected by a garden wall. He begins the image after explaining how Violante got the child:

Well, having gained Pompilia, the girl grew  
 I' the midst of Pietro here, Violante there,  
 Each like a semicircle with stretched arms,  
 Joining the other round her preciousness--  
 Two walls that go about a garden-plot  
 Where a chance sliver, branchlet slipt from bole  
 Of some tongue-leaved eye-figured Eden tree,  
 Filched by two exiles and borne far away,  
 Patiently glorifies their solitude,--  
 Year by year mounting, grade by grade surmount  
 The builded brick-work, yet is compassed still,  
 Still hidden happily and shielded safe,--  
 Else why should miracle have graced the ground? (III,  
 229-41)

The Comparini have a holy duty to guard Pompilia. If that were not the purpose of the theft of the Eden-tree, the sin has no expiation. But that duty becomes ever more difficult to fulfill, as the girl grows and begins to attract the notice of the world:

Nay, above towered a light tuft of bloom  
 To be toyed with by butterfly or bee,  
 Done good to or else harm to from outside:  
 Pompilia's root, stalk and a branch or two  
 Home enclosed still, the rest would be the world's.  
 (III, 244-48)

Other Half-Rome continues the figure in relating Paolo's proposition to Violante concerning the marriage of her daughter with his brother:

Come, cards on table, was it true or false  
 That here--here in this very tenement--  
 Yea, Via Vittoria did a marvel hide,  
 Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf  
 Guessed thro' the sheath that saved it from the sun?  
 A daughter with the mother's hands still clasped  
 Over her head for fillet virginal,  
 A wife worth Guido's house and hand and heart? (III,  
 362-69)

The sexual suggestions in this passage arise out of the image of a protected maiden, a girl sheathed from the world's impurity by her mother's care. Here the hands are passive and preservative rather than active and violating. The monologist represents Violante's telling her husband of Paolo's offer in similar terms:

How somebody had somehow somewhere seen  
 Their tree-top-tuft of bloom upon the wall,  
 And came now to apprise them the tree's self  
 Was no such crab-sort as should go feed swine,  
 But veritable gold, the Hesperian ball  
 Ordained for Hercules to haste and pluck,  
 And bear and give the Gods to banquet with--[.] (III, 380-86)

Tertium Quid applies the sheath image to the marriage transaction when he describes it as a business deal disguised by politic lies:

Hence was the need, on either side, of a lie  
 To serve as decent wrappage: so Guido gives  
 Money for money, --and they, bride for groom,  
 Having, he, not a doit, they, not a child  
 Honestly theirs, but this poor waif and stray. (IV,  
 520-24)

His extension of the image (by reversing it) is typical of the careful structure of his conversation, designed to produce an impression in his hearers' minds of his own cleverness and savoir faire. He says that following the ceremony each of the parties to the deal began to shuck the other's pretenses off the central facts. The Comparini stripped faster and complained more quickly and loudly:

Had each pretence  
 Been simultaneously discovered, stript  
 From off the body o' the transaction, just  
 As when a cook (will Excellency forgive?)  
 Strips away those long rough superfluous legs  
 From either side the crayfish, leaving folk  
 A meal all meat henceforth, no garnishry,  
 (With your respect, Prince!)--balance had been kept,  
 No party blamed the other,--so, starting fair,  
 All subsequent fence of wrong returned by wrong  
 I' the matrimonial thrust and parry, at least  
 Had followed on equal terms. But, as it chanced,  
 One party had the advantage, saw the cheat  
 Of the other first and kept its own concealed: (IV, 537-50)

Guido, enumerating the qualities he looked for in his bride,  
 asks:

Why could not she come in some heart-shaped cloud,  
 Rainbow'd about with riches, royalty  
 Rimming her round, as round the tintless lawn  
 Guardingly runs the selvage cloth of gold?  
 I would have left the faint fine gauze untouched,  
 Needle-worked over with its lily and rose,  
 Let her bleach unmolested in the midst,  
 Chill that selected solitary spot  
 Of quietude she pleased to think was life. (XI, 2119-27)



He prefers a vibrant woman, but most of all a rich one. If Pompilia had come to him in the middle of a large sum of money, he would have been content with her. Indeed the sheathing money, because it would have pacified the Count, would have been her protection. But lacking that protection she needed another, which Caponsacchi supplied. Pompilia, in speaking of an incident during their flight, remarks:

I could believe himself by his strong will  
Had woven around me what I thought the world  
We went along in, every circumstance,  
Towns, flowers and faces, all things helped so well!  
(VII, 1544-47)

He has sheathed her in a new conception of the world. That she fully appreciated its protective implications is suggested in her description of Guido's arrival in her room at the inn in Castelnuovo. She was sleeping "When in, my dreadful husband and the world / Broke,--" (VII, 1569-70). The placement of the verb at the beginning of the line puts on it a natural emphasis, which is augmented by the double stop following it. She conceives of Guido as shattering the shield her Saint George had been able to establish about her.

His first sight of Pompilia makes Caponsacchi comprehend the barrenness of his life and prompts him to seek protection from it in Rome. He expresses his need for protection in terms reminiscent of the sheath imagery in speaking of his decision to go to Rome:

["] I will live alone, one does so in a crowd,  
And look into my heart a little." (VI, 475-76)

The idea of loneliness amid crowds, a single thing surrounded by a plurality of things, is the picture which suggests to me the connection with the sheath figure.

Bottini, in prosecuting Guido, uses the sheath image to present this unnecessary defense of actions which occurred only in his imagination. He admits, for the sake of argument, that the relationship between wife and priest was of long standing at the time of their flight. His "rhetorical" questions,

Must such external semblance of intrigue  
 Demonstrate that intrigue there lurks perdue?  
 Does every hazel-sheath disclose a nut? (IX, 560-62)

are part of the pattern of protection through disguise, and add further evidence against the Fisc.

Guido represents his own predicament after the birth of his son in much the same terms: his son is sheathed from him, but he has no protection from the tortures which the Comparini can inflict on him through the child. The passage is from the letter he received in December from Rome:

[<sup>u</sup>] And he's already hidden away and safe  
 From any claim on him you mean to make--  
 They need him for themselves,--don't fear, they know  
 The use o' the bantling,--the nerve thus laid bare  
 To nip at, new and nice, with finger-nail!" (V, 1171-75)

One final illustration of this subject of the development (of the sheath as a protective wrapper) must suffice. Guido, in speaking of the change he is about to undergo in passing from the earthly to the eternal life, says:

On earth I never took the Pope for God,  
 In heaven I shall scarce take God for the Pope.  
 Unmanned, remanned: I hold it probable--  
 With something changeless at the heart of me  
 To know me by, some nucleus that's myself:  
 Accretions did it wrong? Away with them--  
 You soon shall see the use of fire! (XI, 2384-90)

This is not, as it might at first glance seem, an expression of a hoped-for or looked-for reform. Rather, Guido is contemplating the purgation of all extraneous details from his essentially wolf-like nature. The "nucleus" surrounded by "accretions" which are to be stripped away suggests the inclusion of the image in the sheath pattern, or in the pattern of distillation and quintessence--a pattern which is large and distinct, but which cannot concern me here.

As I have shown, the enclosure images--those of trap and sheath--are interrelated. Moreover, they are related to the plot of the poem, its rescue theme. But this twofold relation--of the images with each other and with the minor theme of the poem--is complicated by a third relation--that of images to the major theme of the poem (the virtual impossibility for man to know and to communicate truth). The poet suggests early the relationship which his sheathing images will bear to his major theme, when he digresses on torture as an instrument for getting at truth:

pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone  
 To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls, (I, 980-81)

An analogous suggestion of this "third relation" appeared in Bottini's comment concerning the appearance and reality

of intrigues. This relation between images and major theme will be more significant in terms of the images which comprise Variation 2, but is of interest here. Before I establish the patterns of the second variation, I must deal with a final issue--that of the inversion of the enclosure images by Guido and his supporters. These inversions are accomplished by altering the symbolic weights usually (normally) assigned to certain figures.

## V

The most obvious instance of such an inversion is Half-Rome's whole presentation of Guido's "courtship" of Pompilia. Pompilia is, again, the bait which lures the prey to the trap; but in Half-Rome's mouth, the angler is Violante, the prey, Guido:

She who had caught one fish, could make that catch  
A bigger still, in angler's policy:  
So, with an angler's mercy for the bait,  
Her minnow was set wriggling on its barb  
And tossed to mid-stream; which means, this grown girl  
With the great eyes and bounty of black hair  
And first crisp youth that tempts a jaded taste,  
Was whisked i' the way of a certain man, who snapped.  
(II, 268-75)

The minnow, of course, is Pompilia, whom Violante had "caught" from her mother. When he tells how Pompilia left her seclusion with the Convertites to go to live with the Comparini, Half-Rome wonders at her action. He cannot understand how she could still trust them after the way they had used her. He says that they

first had baited hook  
 With this poor gilded fly Pompilia-thing,  
 Then caught the fish, pulled Guido to the shore  
 And gutted him, now found a further use  
 For the bait, would trail the gauze wings yet again  
 I' the way of what new swimmer passed their stand. (II,  
 1346-51)

Tertium Quid's similar image is characteristically  
 indecisive:

which bird o' the brace  
 Decoyed the other into clapnet? Who  
 Was fool, who knave? Neither and both, perchance. (IV,  
 503-05)

His hesitation to assign the roles of predator and victim  
 fades to some extent, allowing him to employ the image in  
 its inverted form, with the pejorative emphasis falling on  
 the Comparini, who left Pompilia in Arezzo and

Meant she should stay behind and take the chance,  
 If haply they might wriggle themselves free.  
 They baited their own hook to catch a fish  
 With this poor worm, failed o' the prize, and then  
 Sought how to unbait tackle, let worm float  
 Or sink, amuse the monster while they 'scaped. (IV,  
 700-05)

However, the suggestion of desertion mitigates this adverse  
 judgment, as it implies that there was good reason for the  
 Comparini to flee--such good reason that they should have  
 taken Pompilia with them. This restoration of judicial balance  
 is highly characteristic of "Tertium Quid."

Archangeli, in defending Guido, mentions

"That letter which...Pompilia wrote,  
 To criminate her parents and herself  
 And disengage her husband from the coil,-- [" (VIII,  
 155-57)

and conventionally inverts the image. Guido claims that, when Pompilia learned that she was not the Comparini's child, she should have written them to this effect:

I, spoil and prey of you from first to last,  
I who have done you the blind service, lured  
The lion to your pitfall, -- I, thus left  
To answer for my ignorant bleating there, (V, 794-97)

This inversion is notable in several particulars. First, Guido attributes to the Comparini behavior with which Pompilia taxes him (VI, 1336 ff.). Second, the wolf calls himself "The lion" and applies the image of sheep-lure to his wife, whom he usually equates with reptiles. Another employment, for his own purposes, of the trap figure occurs in Guido's disclaimer of further interest in the contest with the Comparini following Pompilia's removal from the convent:

Point by point as they plan they execute,  
They gain all, and I lose all--even to the lure  
That led to loss, --they have the wealth again  
They hazarded awhile to hook me with,  
Have caught the fish and find the bait entire:  
They even have their child or changeling back  
To trade with, turn to account a second time. (V, 1392-98)

Guido's use of the image, even in its debased form, varies with his momentary needs. In the illustration above Pompilia was the tool of her parents; in the one below she acts autonomously with a different quarry in mind:

Thus, when he blamed me, "You are a coquette,  
A lure-owl posturing to attract birds,  
You look love-lures at theatre and church,  
In walk, at window!" --that, I knew, was false:  
But why he charged me falsely, whither sought  
To drive me by such charge, --how could I know?  
So, unaware, I only made things worse. (VII, 671-77)



The monologist is Pompilia, but her report of her husband's accusation is probably accurate. It is particularly revealing of Bottini's character that, in prosecuting Guido, he should use the inverted image. This is a part of his plan to display his skill by making the case a collection of grays rather than of the sharp blacks and whites of its true complexion. He ponders the nature of the attraction which Pompilia exerted over Caponsacchi:

Shall she propose him lucre, dust o' the mine,  
 Rubbish o' the rock, some diamond, muckworms prize,  
 Some pearl secreted by a sickly fish?  
 Scarcely! She caters for a generous taste.  
 'T is shall love beckon, beauty bid to breast,  
 Till all the Samson sink into the snare! (IX, 510-515)

The transition from Pompilia as bait to the girl as trapper is complete. Archangeli is justifiably worried about an opponent who uses such devious methods, and says of him:

He'll keep clear of my cast, my logic-throw,  
 Let argument slide, and then deliver swift  
 Some bowl from quite an unguessed point of stand--  
 Having the luck o' the last word, the reply!  
 A plaguy cast, a mortifying stroke:  
 You face a fellow--cries "So, there you stand?  
 But I discourteous jump clean o'er your head!["] VIII,  
 239-45)

This passage employs the trap image ("my cast, my logic throw") and the violation motif ("bowl"), and plays on them both in the picture of Archangeli trying to incarcerate his opponent behind walls of legal technicalities only to have him jump over the wall and escape.

The pleadings of the lawyers confirm the Pope in his lack of faith in human capacities to communicate truth:

Therefore these filthy rags of speech, this coil  
 Of statement, comment, query and response,  
 Tatters all too contaminate for use,  
 Have no renewing: (X, 372-75)

Cook suggests that the last three words mean that human communication cannot be cleansed--the truth cannot be extracted from it.<sup>1</sup> The lawyers are concerned only with grasping a legal victory; they care not for the truth. Guido wants to trap life:

Then must speak Guido yet a second time,  
 Satan's old saw being apt here--skin for skin,  
 All a man hath that will he give for life.  
 While life was graspable and gainable,  
 And bird-like buzzed her wings round Guido's brow,  
 Not much truth stiffened out the web of words  
 He wove to catch her: when away she flew  
 And death came, death's breath rivelled up the lies,  
 Left bare the metal thread, the fibre fine  
 Of truth, i' the spinning: the true words shone last.  
 (I, 1264-73)

"Rivelled," meaning shrivelled, wrinkled, derives from words signifying furrow, rake, and cut. Lies are imaged as lint upon the cloth of truth--an obscurity which proximity to death brushes away, leaving the truth bright, unsheathed--much like the sword Pompilia wields at Castelnuovo. Twelve lines later the poet shows his villain incarcerated, with changed (revealed) nature:

the thing part man part monster in the midst,  
 So changed is Franceschini's gentle blood.  
 The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,  
 That pried and tried and trod so gingerly,  
 Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth joined;  
 Then you know how the bristling fury foams. (I, 1286-91)

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<sup>1</sup>Cook, p. 209.

The Pope refers to Guido as caged by his poverty when he meditates on the proper function of life as trial:

Is this our ultimate stage, or starting-place  
 To try man's foot, if it will creep or climb,  
 'Mid obstacles in seeming, points that prove  
 Advantages for who vaults from low to high  
 And makes the stumbling-block a stepping-stone?  
 So, Guido, born with appetite, lacks food:  
 Is poor, who yet could deftly play-off wealth:  
 Straitened, whose limbs are restless till at large.  
 He, as he eyes each outlet of the cirque  
 And narrow penfold for probation, pines  
 After the good things just outside its grate[.] (X, 408-18)

This speech, a close echo of Tertium Quid's about Pompilia (IV, 781 ff.), used to defend Guido, accentuates the Pope's fairness. But the Pontiff is not being indecisive: he casts aspersions on Guido's ability to act, and he assigns a reason for this inability. Guido acts out of a lust for "things"; his motives--greed and hate--are selfish. He is unable to make his trials stepping-stones to the higher life. He cannot act because his feelings are dormant--his hand is ineffective because his heart is unaffected.

It is significant that Guido is linked with the hand in three ways that are opposed to the use of the hand as a symbol of salvation through action--with three perversions of the hand imagery. He sees the results of the use of the hand as detrimental to himself (usually the action in question is initiated by someone else); or he fails to use his hand; or he uses it as an instrument of persecution rather than of salvation. In his second monologue, Guido complains:

She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,  
 Come and confront me--not at judgment-seat  
 Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,  
 And turn her truth into a lie, --but there,  
 O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,  
 Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,  
 Tell her own story her own way, and turn  
 My plausibility to nothingness! (XI, 1677-84)

In the first line the image of the light of truth obscured by death prepares nicely for the succeeding image of the interposed hand. To Guido, the hand is not the means that helps over barriers; rather, it is itself the barrier. He admits his perversity several hundred lines later:

I who, with outlet for escape to heaven,  
 Would tarry if such flight allowed my foe  
 To raise his head, relieved of that firm foot  
 Had pinned him to the fiery pavement else! (XI, 2089-92)

Not only would he not assist (lend a helping hand to) his enemy, he would forego his own chance for salvation to damn another. The lifting hand has become the crushing foot.

Bottini is more subtle in his perversions of the normative image. He uses the hand as a symbol of salvation: then he undercuts his secure position with the sexual implications of his words:

He only, Caponsacchi 'mid a crowd,  
 Caught Virtue up, carried Pompilia off  
 Through gaping impotence of sympathy  
 In ranged Arezzo: what you take for pitch,  
 Is nothing worse, belike, than black and blue,  
 Mere evanescent proof that hardy hands  
 Did yeoman's service, cared not where the gripe  
 Was more than duly energetic: bruised,  
 She smarts a little, but her bones are saved  
 A fracture, and her skin will soon show sleek. (IX,  
 993-1002)

Several features of this passage are noteworthy. Caponsacchi carried Pompilia "through gaping impotence of sympathy / In ranged Arezzo." This diction ("through," "gaping," "ranged") marks the image as part of the Limits-Violation pattern (Variation 1). Also, the bruises are part of the blot imagery which comprises one development of Variation 2. This latter classification is especially valid since Bottini addresses the public, in the person of Archangeli (representing the side of the case which the public found appealing), and since popular opinion is often pictured as a dark, marring spot on whiteness. But Bottini's really spectacular perversion of the hand imagery occurs some two hundred lines before the passage quoted just above. In preparing to admit and mitigate the falsehood of Pompilia's protestations of her illiteracy, he begins by saying that small sins look like virtues when compared to big sins. Granting that the biggest sin a woman can commit is impudence (it "unwomans" her), then the sins committed in order to prevent that sin are nugatory:

And, what is taxed here as duplicity,  
 Feint, wile and trick,--admitted for the nonce, --  
 What worse do one and all than interpose,  
 Hold, as it were, a deprecating hand,  
 Statuesquely, in the Medicean mode,  
 Before some shame which modesty would veil?  
 Who blames the gesture prettily perverse? (IX, 794-800)

Here the hand is not an instrument for violating limits, it acts negatively to impose them; Pompilia is not the victim of barriers, she is their creator for her own selfish purposes.

Archangeli uses a less obvious perversion of the hand image when he says:

Bottini is a beast, one barbarous:  
 Look out for him when he attempts to say  
 "Armed with a pistol, Guido followed her!"  
 Will I not be beforehand with my Fisc,  
 Cut away phrase by phrase from underfoot! (VIII, 197-201)

He represents himself as cutting away underbrush to reveal the traps set for him by Bottini. He does not want to be caught, to need a helping hand--he wants to be "beforehand with my Fisc."

A prominent example of Guido's failure to use his hand is in the description by Other Half-Rome of the Count's plan to drive Pompilia to commit a crime and so be rid of her:

So should the loathed form and detested face  
 Launch themselves into hell and there be lost  
 While he looked o'er the brink with folded arms; (III,  
 723-25)

He refuses to extend a helping hand--he stands by inactive, "with folded arms."

In his second monologue, Guido twice refers to his plight in terms of the failure of a hand:

Here they drop it in his palm,  
 My lawyers, capital o' the cursed kind,--  
 Drop life to take and hold and keep: but no!  
 He sighs, shakes head, refuses to shut hand,  
 Motions away the gift they bid him grasp,  
 And of the coyness comes--that off I run  
 And down I go, he best knows whither! (XI, 71-77)

Later in the book he attributes his capture to the refusal of a hostler to be bribed:



balked by just a scrupulous knave  
 Whose palm was horn through handling horses' hoofs  
 And could not close upon my proffered gold! (XI, 1666-68)

Finally, Guido is associated with the persecuting hand.

Caponsacchi reports that Pompilia said of her husband:

I found I had become Count Guido's wife:  
 Who then, not waiting for a moment, changed  
 Into a fury of fire, if once he was  
 Merely a man: his face threw fire at mine,  
 He laid a hand on me that burned all peace,  
 All joy, all hope, and last all fear away,  
 Dipping the bough of life, so pleasant once,  
 In fire which shrivelled leaf and bud alike,  
 Burning not only present life but past,  
 Which you might think was safe beyond his reach. (VI,  
 759-68)

In the following illustration, which concludes examples of the first half of the pattern of perverted images, Tertium Quid reports Caponsacchi's reply to Guido's statement that he did not need to drive Pompilia away, because he had ample opportunity to kill her outright: the priest retorts that Guido first tried guile, the coward's way, and only when that failed did he try direct violence.

the disgrace  
 You hardly shrunk at, wholly shrivelled her:  
 You plunged her thin white delicate hand i' the flame  
 Along with your coarse horny brutish fist,  
 Held them a second there, then drew out both  
 --Yours roughed a little, hers ruined through and through.  
 Your hurt would heal forthwith at ointment's touch--  
 Namely, succession to the inheritance  
 Which bolder crime had lost you: (IV, 1090-98)

Guido's insensitivity is protection enough; Pompilia has none.

## VI

The enclosure-for-protection images are perverted as thoroughly as are the enclosure-for-persecution ones. The Pope, picturing Guido's advantages of birth as balanced by his blunt moral sense, speaks of this balance as good:

Wherein I see a trial fair and fit  
 For one else too unfairly fenced about,  
 Set above sin, beyond his fellows here: (X, 426-28)

The inversion contained in the image arises out of the position of Guido vis-à-vis the fence: in the normative images, Guido, the impeder, is equated with the wall; here he is within the enclosure and protected by it. The Pope later enumerates Guido's advantages. The passage recalls one quoted above in which the Pope likens Guido to a shelled sea-creature:

Great birth, good breeding with the Church for guide,  
 How lives he? Cased thus in a coat of proof,  
 Mailed like a man-at-arms, though all the while  
 A puny starveling, --does the breast pant big,  
 The limb swell to the limit, emptiness  
 Strive to become solidity indeed? (X, 479-84)

Probably the climactic expression of Guido protected by his clerical orders is uttered by the Pope in likening Guido to a watcher who continues to live in the tower long after he has ceased to hear the bell:

Why, but because the solemn is safe too,  
 The belfry proves a fortress of a sort,  
 Has other uses than to teach the hour:  
 Turns sunscreen, paravent and ombrifuge  
 To whoso seeks a shelter in its pale, (X, 462-66)

The diction in these lines is expansive: i.e., "paravent" hints at both "prevent" and "parapluie," the French for umbrella; "ombrifuge" suggests "refuge in a shadow." Guido takes refuge from the secular law in the shadow of the Church, within its enclosure. "Pale" means "fence" and enforces the enclosure-protection image, but also means "waning light" and aids the shadow image. But the passage has complications other than the verbal. It shows the Pope's fairness, his decisive balance. He makes every effort truly to understand Guido, and when he thinks he has, he judges him. There is no doubt as to the outcome of the debate, but that there is debate is to his credit.

Another example of the barrier image perverted is these lines from Guido's speech before his judges, where he explains his delay in avenging himself in Rome after his arrival during the Christmas season:

I stopped my ears even to the inner call  
 Of the dread duty, only heard the song  
 "Peace upon earth," saw nothing but the face  
 O' the Holy Infant and the halo there  
 Able to cover yet another face  
 Behind it, Satan's which I else should see.  
 But, day by day, joy waned and withered off:  
 The Babe's face, premature with peak and pine,  
 Sank into wrinkled ruinous old age,  
 Suffering and death, then mist-like disappeared,  
 And showed only the Cross at end of all,  
 Left nothing more to interpose 'twixt me  
 And the dread duty: (V, 1589-1601)

He represents himself as trying to construct a barrier (the vision of the Child) between himself and the duty (defense of his honor, which is equivalent to murder)--a duty he calls

"dread" twice in these lines. The rhetoric is inspired: Guido, on trial for his life, speaks of the murder he has committed as both unavoidable and dread. He has the best of both adjectives, and thereby paints himself as a hero. The mist which disappears to reveal the Cross is itself a perversion of the obscuration images. Normally clouds are linked with the shrouding of truth symbolized generally by light and more particularly by a star. Here, however, truth is replaced by duty, and the cross stands for the star.

From this double inversion we pass to an example of Guido's treatment of the encirclement image, in his account of the Castelnuovo episode, where he

Found what confirmed the worst was feared before,  
 However needless confirmation now--  
 The witches' circle intact, charms undisturbed  
 That raised the spirit and succubus,--letters, to-wit,  
 Love-laden, each the bag o' the bee that bore  
 Honey from lily and rose to Cupid's hive,--  
 Now, poetry in some rank blossom-burst,  
 Now, prose [.] (V, 1129-36)

He here applies to the hero and heroine the image, complete with black magic diction, that the poet applied in Book I to the Franceschini.

Guido cannot resist the temptation to magnify the offense to his honor by imputing to Caponsacchi fatherhood of Gaetano, even though such imputation weakens his claim to the Comparini's money through Gaetano's inheritance. This next passage nicely illustrates Guido's perversion of several facets of the image pattern I have been illustrating:

Who will he be, how will you call the man?  
 A Franceschini, --when who cut my purse,  
 Filched my name, hemmed me round, hustled me hard  
 As rogues at a fair some fool they strip i' the midst,  
 When these count gains, vaunt pillage presently:--  
 But a Caponsacchi, oh, be very sure! (V, 1486-91)

Guido sees himself as surrounded by tormentors; in a sense he is caged. His tormentors strip him (shuck him as one would an ear of corn) of his protective pretense. His substitution of himself for Pompilia in the center of the circle twists the image, as does the notion that evil needs protection.

Variation 1 has dealt with imagistic echoes of the plot, or, if you will, of the minor theme of rescue. The total pattern was presented in terms of limits and their violation. The first development of this variation was enclosure to imprison; the second, enclosure to protect. The image classifications which correspond to these divisions are those which I have called trap-cage and sheath. The images which comprise these categories interrelate; the categories overlap. The difficulty in applying rigid distinctions to The Ring and the Book attributes to Browning's invention and resourcefulness in playing upon and integrating his poetic materials.

#### Variation 2

The second variation consists of images connected with two substances from which the husk protects the kernel, the scabbard sheathes the sword. This pattern is more directly connected with the theme of truth and its obscuration, as has been intimated, than with the theme of rescue, although the two themes are interrelated through Caponsacchi's rescue

of Pompilia--that which the poem sets up as true. Action prompted by love is a truth which the Pope, alone among the spectators, can perceive; and he acts to save truth by condemning Guido.

This pattern associated with truth and its obscuration has two component subjects--mud and blots.

## I

The first half of the pattern, the first development within Variation 2, centers on the image of mud. Mud is usually presented as symbolic of an unpleasant situation, a predicament, from which someone wants, or should want, to escape. But it also suggests a Darwinian cradle of life--the demarcation between object and existence--a place where the inanimate becomes alive. From a third overtone which the mud imagery carries with it, one infers that it can also stand for public opinion, gossip, calumny. In all instances it operates to cast aspersions on certain of the characters associated with it.

The first character associated with mud is Pompilia's actual mother, to whom Other Half-Rome here refers:

The creature thus conditioned found by chance  
 Motherhood like a jewel in the muck,  
 And straightway either trafficked with her prize  
 Or listened to the tempter and let be,--  
 Made pact abolishing her place and part  
 In womankind, beast-fellowship indeed. (II, 559-64)

The words "creature" and "beast-fellowship" are typical of the kind of diction which operates to associate mud with a sub-human level of life. The change which Pompilia rings



on the image, in applying it to the same person, reveals her characteristic charity to those who have abused her. She feels that her mother was

At mercy of the hateful: every beast  
 O' the field was wont to break that fountain-fence  
 Trample the silver into mud so murk  
 Heaven could not find itself reflected there.  
 Now they cry "Out on her, who, plashy pool,  
 Bequeathed turbidity and bitterness  
 To the daughter-stream where Guido dipt and drank!"  
 (VII, 861-67)

Even Pompilia regards her mother's life as muddy, but she attributes the muddiness to conditions of hate and prejudice beyond the woman's power to combat.

The Comparini remove the child at birth from this murky environment. The poet describes this first rescue of Pompilia in terms of a rising motion, a lifting from low to high, that parallels the movement associated with her rescue by Caponsacchi-- a lifting over barriers:

Pompilia's parents, as they thought themselves,  
 Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best  
 Part God's way, part the other way than God's,  
 To somehow make a shift and scramble through  
 The world's mud, careless if it splashed and spoiled,  
 Provided they might so hold high, keep clean  
 Their child's soul, one soul white enough for three,  
 And lift it to whatever star should stoop,  
 What possible sphere of purer life than theirs  
 Should come in aid of whiteness hard to save. (I, 522-31)

Here mud is equated with "the world," experience, loss of innocence. Thus the image is related to the figure Other Half-Rome uses, presenting the Comparini's duty to shield Pompilia's purity in terms of a wall enclosing a garden, of a calyx sheathing a bud.

Other Half-Rome also uses the mud image, as in his report of Pietro's inquiries about the Franceschini. Pietro's friends offer three admonitions which cause a single reaction:

Why, friends whose zeal cried "Caution ere too late!"--  
 Bade "Pause ere jump, with both feet joined, on slough!"--  
 Counsell'd "If rashness then, now temperance!"--  
 Heard for their pains that Pietro had closed eyes,  
 Jumped and was in the middle of the mire,  
 Money and all, just what should sink a man. (III, 489-90)

The speaker extends his image a few lines later as he explains the motives behind their acceptance of the marriage proposal:

Into this quag, "jump" bade the Cardinal!  
 And neck-deep in a minute there flounced they.

But they touched bottom at Arezzo: (III, 518-20)

"Bottom" probably means the bottom of the "quag," but it also suggests that the Franceschini household is a spiritual bottom, a moral and ethical sink into which the Comparini have fallen.

Having fallen, they extricate themselves, and return to Rome to publish stories about the nobleman their daughter married. Half-Rome addresses them in the first line of this passage:

You had the Countship holding head aloft  
 Bravely although bespattered, shifts and straits  
 In keeping out o' the way o' the wheels o' the world,  
 (II, 662-64)

He does not identify Guido with mud; rather he represents him as distinct from it, opposed to it, and damaged by it. This sympathy is to be expected from Half-Rome, and the image,

except for the shift in the relation between mud and the character, is standard in its equation of mud with the world, suggestive here more of malicious gossip than of experience. Archangeli closely echoes this image in his letter in "The Book and the Ring" when he boasts that though he lost the case he advanced his family's interest:

With this rein did I rescue from the ditch  
The fortune of our Franceschini, keep  
Unsplashed the credit of a noble House, (XII, 367-69)

The vehicle common to both images is the carriage, pictured as driven quickly down a muddy street.

Half-Rome plays on the contrast between public street and private residence as he contends that Guido's objection to Violante's confession derived not from anger at the loss of the dowry, but from his desire to clear both their names of these foul imputations:

From her  
And him alike he would expunge the blot,  
Erase the brand of such a bestial birth,  
Participate in no hideous heritage  
Gathered from the gutter to be garnered up  
And glorified in a palace. (II, 602-07)

The heavy alliteration of these lines, especially the hard "g's," suggests an animal growl and reinforce, by having human imitate bestial utterance, the contrast between high and low, between the palace and the gutter.

Guido associates mud with debasement, either of his social rank or of his integrity (a purely social quality in his mind: "what do others think?" rather than "what is right?"). He

describes his service to the Church as that of a messenger boy, a go-between for people of lower birth, but of higher accomplishments than his own:

Deliver message from my Monsignor,  
With varletry at lounge i' the vestibule  
I'm barred from who bear mud upon my shoe. (V, 305-07)

Several hundred lines later, after relating how he had drunk the shameful cup of rumor to find that Caponsacchi was the dregs, he switches metaphors:

I, --chin-deep in a marsh of misery,  
Struggling to extricate my name and fame  
And fortune from the marsh would drown them all,  
My face the sole unstrangled part of me,--  
I must have this new gad-fly in that face,  
Must free me from the attacking lover too! (V, 906-11)

By implication, then, the muddy "marsh" stands for rumor, which has virtually drowned his fame--blackened it beyond all recognition.

Tertium Quid similarly implies an identification of mud with rumor when he speaks of the letters Guido attributes to Pompilia as her means of attracting Caponsacchi to her aid:

Which brought him, though reluctant, to her feet,  
And forced on him the plunge which, howsoe'er  
She might swim up i' the whirl, must bury him  
Under abysmal black: a priest contrive  
No better, no amour to be hushed up,  
But open flight and noon-day infamy? (IV, 941-46)

Although mud is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied by the diction of light and liquid.

Mud is occasionally linked with insensibility, as in this passage from Half-Rome:

One merry April morning, Guido woke  
 After the cuckoo, so late, near noonday,  
 With an inordinate yawning of the jaws,  
 Ears plugged, eyes gummed together, palate, tongue  
 And teeth one mud-paste made of poppy-milk; (II, 881-85)

Cook comments on this passage:

The cuckoo is of course an early bird, so that 'waking after the cuckoo' would be an ironical understatement for late waking. The point is that Caponsacchi is the cuckoo; he has been beforehand with Guido, cuckolded him, made him a wittol [a man who knows of his wife's infidelity and submits to it], and has now carried his wife off.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of the association of mire with insensibility is this expression of Pompilia's faith in Caponsacchi as her protector:

Even at the last when the bewildered flesh,  
 The cloud of weariness about my soul  
 Clogging too heavily, sucked down all sense,--  
 Still its last voice was, "He will watch and care;["]  
 (VII, 1555-58)

The words "clogging" and "sucked down" suggest Guido's picture of drowning in a quagmire.

Bottini uses mud images for a perverse purpose: he is ostensibly concerned with keeping Pompilia's reputation pure, but he goes about it by sullyng her character; he spatters her with mud to give himself an opportunity to wipe her clean.

Evidence shall be  
 Plain witness to the world how white she walks  
 I' the mire she wanders through ere Rome she reach. (IX, 588-90)

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<sup>1</sup>Cook, p. 45.

Bottini claims to be protecting her from scandal, but he proceeds to impugn her whiteness by inverting the image, making her a user of mud rather than its victim. In painting what he considers her crowning virtue, he says,

For to the last Pompilia played her part,  
Used the right means to the permissible end,  
And wily as an eel that stirs the mud  
Thick overhead, so baffling spearman's thrust,  
She, while he stabbed her, simulated death, (IX, 11407-11)

Even without the mud pattern, the eel is similar enough to the snake to place Bottini firmly in the ranks of the anti-Pompilians. A possible reason for this attitude is suggested in this ironic passage:

I always knew the clearness of the stream  
Would show the fish so thoroughly, child might prong  
The clumsy monster: with no mud to splash,  
Small credit to lynx-eye and lightning spear! (XII,  
407-10)

The gigger is Bottini, the clear stream the obvious truth of the case which gave him so little opportunity or need to display his legal skill. Ironically, just this selfish display--the sophistries of law, the subtleties of the head--muddied the waters of truth with extraneous images of truth and rendered the simple complex.

Caponsacchi early perceived the simplicity of truth and asks the Court why it did not:

Could you fail read this cartulary aright  
On head and front of Franceschini there,  
Large-lettered like hell's masterpiece of print,--  
That he, from the beginning pricked at heart  
By some lust, letch of hate against his wife,



Plotted to plague her into overt sin  
 And shame, would slay Pompilia body and soul,  
 And save his mean self--miserably caught  
 I' the quagmire of his own tricks, cheats and lies?  
 (VI, 1765-73)

The imagery from printing which opens the passage (a "cartulary" is a book of charters) relates it to the blot imagery which I shall discuss in section two of this Variation. But the immediately relevant lines are the last two.

How different are the implications of the mud image in Half-Rome's mouth:

No: take the old way trod when men were men!  
 Guido preferred the new path [Law], --for his pains,  
 Stuck in a quagmire, floundered worse and worse  
 Until he managed somehow scramble back  
 Into the safe sure rutted road once more,  
 Revenged his own wrong like a gentleman.  
 Once back 'mid the familiar prints, no doubt  
 He made too rash amends for his first fault,  
 Vaulted too loftily over what barred him late,  
 And lit i' the mire again,--the common chance[.] (II, 1513-22)

To equate the Law with a barrier to action is in keeping with the données of the poem, but to call the triple murder a "common chance" is pure Half-Rome.

Guido complains that the Pope will not extricate him from the mud into which he has fallen:

And now what does this Vicar of our Lord,  
 Shepherd o' the flock, --one of whose charge bleats sore  
 For crook's help from the quag wherein it drowns?  
 His pleasure is to turn staff, use the point,  
 And thrust the shuddering sheep, he calls a wolf,  
 Back and back, down and down to where hell gapes! (XI, 397-403)

Here again the motion is a falling one. Guido is aggrieved at the unjust treatment he has received and associates that

treatment with mud. He evinces a similar attitude in the use of a similar image, but this time the source of the "persecution" is society at large:

On, therefore, I must move forthwith, transfer  
 My stranded self, born fish with gill and fin  
 Fit for the deep sea, now left flap bare-backed  
 In slush and sand, a show to crawlers vile  
 Reared of the low-tide and aright therein. (V, 171-75)

The diction is reminiscent of Caliban's "small eft-things," although the tone here is not one of enjoyment but one of disgust. Guido's imagery works against him here, for, while he means that he is forced by hard circumstance to adapt to a foreign environment, there is elsewhere the sense that the low-tide marshes are his natural habitat--that he belongs to a sub-human species. Archangeli apparently senses this, because he images his legal maneuvers in Guido's behalf in terms of the tide coming in to cover the marshes the ebb has revealed:

And now, sea widens and the coast is clear.  
 What of the dubious act you bade excuse?  
 Surely things broaden, brighten, till at length  
 Remains--so far from act that needs defence--  
 Apology to make for act delayed  
 One minute, let alone eight mortal months  
 Of hesitation! (VIII, 963-69)

In terms of the total poem the passage is ironic, for while "the coast is clear" (Guido is protected) the truth is hidden: now only Guido's delay needs justification.

Bottini uses a strikingly similar image to berate Guido for his ill-bred jealousy over Pompilia's change from promiscuity (purely imaginary) to selective infidelity with Caponsacchi (equally illusory):

Nothing died in him  
 Save courtesy, good sense and proper trust,  
 Which, when they ebb from souls they should overflow,  
 Discover stub, weed, sludge and ugliness.  
 (The Pope, we know, is Neapolitan  
 And relishes a sea-side simile.)  
 Deserted by each charitable wave  
 Guido, left high and dry, shows jealous now! (IX, 367-74)

These lines and their context are typical of Bottini: they show his delight in his skill and his determination to display it at whatever cost to the truth.

One more concerned with the truth of right living than with the dubious truths of legal success or religious dogma is Euripides. The Pope imagines the Greek dramatist commenting that his pagan writings were a better guide for living than many Churchmen have found seventeen centuries after the birth of Christ--the dawn of truth:

"[ ] Though just a word from that strong style of mine,  
 Grasped honestly in hand as guiding-staff,  
 Had pricked them a sure path across the bog,  
 That mire of cowardice and slush of lies  
 Wherein I find them wallow in wide day!" (X, 1780-84)

A hundred lines later the Pope resumes the image in stating his hope that doubt will reassert itself to strengthen faith and thus create more Pompilias who will be able to intuit truth:

But what a multitude will surely fall  
 Quite through the crumbling truth, late subjacent,  
 Sink to the next discoverable base,  
 Rest upon human nature, settle there  
 On what is firm, the lust and pride of life!  
 A mass of men, whose very souls even now  
 Seem to need re-creating, --so they slink  
 Worm-like into the mud, light now lays bare,-- (X, 1882-89)

The image is significant for its combination of several motifs which have been observed above--the motifs of falling movement, of intimation that a link exists between mud and the barely human, and of revelation through uncovering.

In the remaining examples, the falling motif becomes predominant, with complementary emphasis on the hand as the instrument of salvation from the muddy situation.

With powerful rhetoric Caponsacchi condemns Guido to the mud of disgrace, bestiality, and death:

I think he will be found (indulge so far!)  
 Not to die so much as slide out of life,  
 Pushed by the general horror and common hate  
 Low, lower, --left o' the very ledge of things,  
 I seem to see him catch convulsively  
 One by one at all honest forms of life,  
 At reason, order, decency and use--  
 To cramp him and get foothold by at least;  
 And still they disengage them from his clutch.  
 "What, you are he, then, had Pompilia once  
 And so forewent her? Take not up with us!"  
 And thus I see him slowly and surely edged  
 Off all the table-land whence life upsprings  
 Aspiring to be immortality,  
 As the snake, hatched on hill-top by mischance,  
 Despite his wriggling, slips, slides, slidders down  
 Hill-side, lies low and prostrate on the smooth  
 Level of the outer place, lapsed in the vale:  
 So I lose Guido in the loneliness,  
 Silence and dusk, till at the doleful end,  
 At the horizontal line, creation's verge,  
 From what just is to absolute nothingness--  
 Whom is it, straining onward still, he meets?  
 What other man deep further in the fate,  
 Who, turning at the prize of a footfall  
 To flatter him and promise fellowship,  
 Discovers in the act a frightful face--  
 Judas, made monstrous by much solitude!  
 The two are at one now! Let them love their love  
 That bites and claws like hate, or hate their hate  
 That mops and mows and makes as it were love!  
 There, let them each tear each in devil's-fun,  
 Or fondle this the other while malice aches--  
 Both teach, both learn detestability!  
 Kiss him the kiss, Iscariot! Pay that back,

That smatch o' the slaver blistering on your lip,  
 By the better trick, the insult he spared Christ--  
 Lure him the lure o' the letters, Aretine!  
 Lick him o'er slimy-smooth with jelly-filth  
 O' the verse-and-prose pollution in love's guise! (VI,  
 1881-1920)

This extended passage of strong poetry particularly illuminates the mud, fall, and hand image patterns. The obvious motion downward toward a margin which delimits human life recalls the identification of mud with a spawning ground of lowly life. Such phrases as "the very ledge of things," "off all the table-land whence life upsprings," and "the horizontal line, creation's verge" suggest this notion most emphatically. Moreover "deep further in the fate" echoes the submergence images which are used to describe calumny and which I have linked to the mud images. The statement of perverted love is described in terms which must have been intended to be repulsive and which could easily describe the texture of mud. None of the things Guido catches at to retard his fall will lend him a hand of assistance: "and still they disengage them from his clutch."

The Pope must decide whether to give or refuse aid:

And I am bound, the solitary judge,  
 To weigh the worth, decide upon the plea,  
 And either hold a hand out, or withdraw  
 A foot and let the wretch drift to the fall. (X, 193-96)

The final three examples are all clearly concerned with the use of a hand to extricate someone from the mud. Other Half-Rome, in describing Pietro's relief at the news that

Pompilia is not his daughter and that he hence will lose neither girl nor dowry, says he acted

As who--what did I say of one in a quag?--  
Should catch a hand from heaven and spring thereby  
Out of the mud, on ten toes stand once more. (III, 617-19)

Caponsacchi berates the Court for regarding the flight from Arezzo so lightly. He imagines their saying:

["] We have been young, too --come, there's greater guilt!  
Let him but decently disembroil himself,  
Scramble from out the scrape nor move the mud, --  
We solid ones may risk a finger-stretch." (VI, 21-24)

Bottini consciously inverts the image to apply it to Guido, but does so for all the wrong reasons. He tries to vindicate Pompilia's bellicose reaction at Castelnuovo by saying that Guido, in approaching her in that spirit, requested and received the same spirit in return:

No question but who jumps into a quag  
Should stretch forth hand and pray us "Pull me out  
By the hand!" such were the customary cry:  
But Guido pleased to bid "Leave hand alone!  
Join both feet, rather, jump upon my head:  
I extricate myself by the rebound!"  
And dutifully as enjoined she jumped--  
Drew his own sword and menaced his own life,  
Anything to content a wilful spouse. (IX, 910-18)

This selection of passages from the poem argues for the existence in it of a pattern of mud imagery. Mud operates as a shifting symbol--identified now with beastliness, now with insensibility, now with adverse opinion, now with obscuration, now with despair, and now with death--gaining complexity and resonance with each new association.



## II

The second half of this pattern, mud's complement, is the imagery concerned with blots--black marks on white surfaces (a violation of a sort) and flaws generally. The "equivalences" associated with the blot images are more distinct and more stable. The blot usually symbolizes defamation and hence is connected with one phase of the mud imagery. But the blot imagery radiates meaning beyond this simple equivalence, because the concept for which the symbol "stands" (defamation) is intimately connected with the major theme of the poem (truth). Usually the white surface is purity or truth and the blots are part of a larger pattern of obscuration images.<sup>1</sup>

It is appropriate that the Pope, the rescuer of truth in the poem, should be the chief user of the blot image and should use it generally in its anti-truth meaning. The image suggests itself to him as he reads the Papal history:

Study some signal judgment that subsists  
To blaze on, or else blot, the page which seals  
The sum up of what gain or loss to God  
Came of His one more Vicar in the world. (X, 17-20)

That portion of the History of the Popes of Rome which deals with the period following the pontificate of Formosus is a series of badly marred pages, for as succeeding Popes were pro- or anti-Formosus they had the records of their partisans reinstated and those of their opponents struck. Thus Pope John IX

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<sup>1</sup>Professor Smith has treated these obscuration images incidentally in his discussion of Browning's use of the star as a symbol of truth, in Browning's Star-Imagery.

Did condemn Stephen, anathematize  
The disinterment, and make all blots blank [. ] (X, 134-35)

Blots have come to symbolize for the Pope partial human judgment or wisdom. His glance into the History of the Popes of Rome--the history of infallibility--strengthens his conviction that for humans the truth is difficult to discover and virtually impossible to achieve. But some points in dispute can be easily settled:

These letters false beyond all forgery--  
Not just handwriting and mere authorship,  
But false to body and soul they figure forth--  
As though the man had cut out shape and shape  
From fancies of that other Aretine, [writer of scatological books]  
To paste below--incorporate the filth  
With cherub baces on a missal-page! (X, 648-54)

The letters are part of Guido's attempt to defame his wife; the Pope realizes that they give no truer idea of her than obscenities would give of a prayer book. The Pope castigates the Comparini for their failure to choose between good and evil paths; yet his chastisement is gentle, for their fault was an inability to see the truth after they had stumbled onto it:

May, you were punished in the very part  
That looked most pure of speck, --'t was honest love  
Betrayed you,-- (X, 1225-27)

They thought the gift of station was necessary to augment their love for Pompilia. As he contemplates the nature of truth the Pope expresses concern that Churchmen spurn the pearl of faith for worldly temptations:

How do the Christians here deport them, keep  
 Their robes of white unspotted by the world? (X, 1147-48)

The answer, of course, is that they do not. In these examples, the Pope uses blot imagery to denote a flaw either in a conception of the truth, or in the conduct to which that conception gives rise.

Pompilia implores Christ to protect and finally reveal the truth of Caponsacchi to a cynical world:

My Caponsacchi! Shield and show--unshroud  
 In Thine own time the glory of the soul  
 If aught obscure, --if ink-spot, from vile pens  
 Scribbling a charge against him--(I was glad  
 Then, for the first time, that I could not write)--  
 Flirted his way, have flecked the blaze! (VII, 1171-76)

These lines play upon the sheath imagery, especially in the alliterative first verse. The spatters are ink spots, part of the printing imagery the Pope uses, rather than mud stains, but the effect of obscuring the truth is the same regardless of the agent. Bottini, too, is anxious that Caponsacchi be free of flaw--though of a different flaw and for a different reason. The lawyer has been painting the priest as a levite who must be free of physical disfigurement. But the change from spiritual to physical values is only part of Bottini's inverted design: he would have Caponsacchi perfect as evidence of Pompilia's excellent taste in choosing her lovers. He uses "candid," which originally meant white, and, by extension, pure:

Comely too, since precise the precept points--  
 On the selected levite be there found  
 Nor mole nor scar nor blemish, lest the mind  
 Come all uncandid through the thwarting flesh! (IX,  
 351-54)

Pompilia, dying, pictures herself as protected against  
 the slanders of the world by the white sheath of truth:<sup>1</sup>

I say, the angel saved me: I am safe!  
 Others may want and wish, I wish nor want  
 One point o' the circle plainer, where I stand  
 Traced round about with white to front the world.  
 What of the calumny I came across,  
 What o' the way to the end?--the end crowns all. (VII,  
 1627-32)

The Pope echoes this image when he says of her:

here the blot is blanch'd  
 By God's gift of a purity of soul  
 That will not take pollution, ermine-like  
 Armed from dishonor by its own soft snow.  
 Such was this gift of God who showed for once  
 How He would have the world go white: (X, 675-80)

Pompilia uses the blot imagery--once problematically:

strange fate  
 Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,  
 Himself this way at least pronounced divorce,  
 Blotted the marriage-bond: this blood of mine  
 Flies forth exultingly at any door,  
 Washes the parchment white, and thanks the blow. (VII,  
 1696-1701)

The paradoxical statement that red blood washes parchment  
 white seems inappropriate to Pompilia. The idea is, of course,  
 that her blood, as a symbol of her death, makes the marriage-  
 bond null as if the parchment had never been written on. The

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<sup>1</sup>Whitla, p. 127.

printing diction remains prominent here, but the force of this use of blotted to mean "annulled," "repealed" has no parallel, even in "The Pope," where the speaker uses it once in that sense.

Bottini temporarily defends Pompilia without inverting the imagery conventionally applied to her:

Where is the ambiguity to blame,  
The flaw to find in our Pompilia? Safe  
She stands, see! Does thy comment follow quick  
"Safe, inasmuch as at the end proposed;  
But thither she picked way by devious path--  
Stands dirtied, no dubiety at all! ["] (IX, 943-48)

He is acting as a shield to keep Pompilia from being spattered by Archangeli; but the reform is short-lived, for he is going to answer this straw man with his opponent's favorite maxim--grant the end, grant the means to that end. Thus he admits that Pompilia is dirtied, but maintains that since she was successful, the dirt is inconsequential.

Archangeli inverts the animal imagery to prove that Guido would have been even lower than the animals if he had not killed Pompilia, and concludes:

Shall man prove the insensible, the block,  
The blot o' the earth he crawls on to disgrace? (VIII,  
529-30)

But Guido is constantly imaged as precisely that--a blot on Creation, a flaw, an error. Caponsacchi's speech, telling of Pompilia's reaction to awakening to find Guido at Castelnuovo, hints at such an equation:

She started up, stood erect, face to face  
With the husband: back he fell, was buttressed there

By the window all a-flame with morning-red.  
 He the black figure, the opprobrious blur  
 Against all peace and joy and light and life. (VI, 1497-1501)

Guido is a blot--a black stain to mar the red gallantry of Caponsacchi--Arezzo's shadow over Rome. The same monologist, describing his meeting with Guido at Castelnuovo, presents the most vivid and apt of all the images applied to the Count:

During this speech of that man, --well, I stood  
 Away, as he managed, --still, I stood as near  
 The throat of him, with these two hands, my own,--  
 As now I stand near yours, Sir, --one quick spring,  
 One great good satisfying gripe, and lo!  
 There had he lain abolished with his lie,  
 Creation purged o' the miscreate, man redeemed,  
 A spittle wiped off from the face of God! (VI, 1447-54)

Caponsacchi's saving hand was almost translated into a destructive paw through hate. A final example is from "Guido," where the Count contemplates what he will say to God and repeats his wife's definition of him:

"Do Thou wipe out the being of me, and smear  
 This soul from off Thy white of things, I blot!  
 I am one huge and sheer mistake, --whose fault?  
 Not mine at least, who did not make myself!" (XI, 934-37)

The Pope's point is that something in Guido did, despite his advantages, operate to ruin him, and Guido later admits as much, when he anticipates the purgation of all accretions from his wolf nature.

The point to which all these illustrations have been leading is a statement of their function in the poem, and an examination of the mechanics behind that function. The



mechanics should be clear from the examples I have garnered and displayed, but perhaps a brief recapitulation would be in order before moving, in the next chapter, to a statement of function. The image patterns of enclosure to torment (cage and trap) and to protect (sheath) are vitally linked to the hand as symbol of salvation and protection, or in its perversion, as symbol of persecution. These types of images echo the basic plot element--the element I have called the theme of rescue. The related patterns of mud and blot images carry various symbolic charges depending on their contexts, but generally act as reinforcements of the major theme of the poem, the theme of truth. This four-part variation on the Saint George theme I have called inclusively the pattern of limits and their violation.

### Chapter III

#### Conclusion

For every important character or significant action in the poem appropriate images have been conceived that may be said to accompany that character or denote that action throughout the poem...The logical, rhetorical, or narrative unity of almost every one of the several main divisions...of the poem has been reenforced [sic] by a dominant image or dominant group of images.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding chapter demonstrated the kind of reinforcement which a dominant group (pattern) of images gives both to the plot ("action," to use Smith's word) and to the themes of truth and of rescue. Reinforcement is achieved through repetition which establishes a pattern (in musical terms, a theme) and plays upon it (with variations). This repetition, these variations, build up a complex aura of meanings around the images, and it is this accretion of meaning which I have called resonance. Resonance functions in the poem as a means of unity—as a technique which helps to overcome the problems inherent in the poem's structure: it ties the ten dramatic monologues together. As the meaning of the image pattern expands, as the overtones clustering about it thicken, the total poem becomes tighter-knit, more compact. Its parts increasingly interrelate and it grows steadily more organic.

Browning's major critics have not discussed his imagery as a source of unity in his work. For example, Smith makes only cautious claims for the role of reiterated images:

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, p. 194.

they produce what Dr. Spurgeon...has called an 'undersong,' the music, in this instance, of themes ever recurrent and interestingly modified, that helps to give descriptive interest to a fundamentally critical, or philosophical composition.<sup>1</sup>

The reference to The Ring and the Book as "a fundamentally critical or philosophical composition" is in keeping with Smith's opinion that it is the poet's purpose in the poem—"the revelation of Man to men"—that unifies the work. However, Smith does not absolutely relegate imagery to a decorative role. He uses the term "artistic integration" in reference to Browning's intentional, frequent, and significant echoes of one use of an image by other uses of it.<sup>2</sup> He does not make his point just this way, but it seems that his "principle of artistic integration" is synonymous with my "unity through resonance."

But image patterns do other things than unify. James indicates one of these when he says that "the three [chief characters are] built up at us each with an equal genial rage of reiterative touches."<sup>3</sup> These "touches" work not only positively by associating a certain set of images with a character, but also negatively by showing how a given character misuses the image pattern associated with another character. As this principle has been copiously illustrated above, Bottini's words—the poem's statement of the principle—must suffice here to make the point:

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>3</sup>James, p. 403.

I hope you heard my adversary ring  
 The changes on this precept: now, let me  
 Reverse the peal! (IX, 518-20)

A remark of Honan supports this point, and introduces another, related, matter:

In The Ring and the Book, in effect, nine different "poets" are hard at work unconsciously revealing themselves; each speaker—each "poet," as it were—tends to use certain key images that the other speakers do, as well as many unique images, but to use even the key images in a way that particularly distinguishes and exposes his own character.<sup>1</sup>

While it is true that every monologist reveals more of himself than he intends, it would be inaccurate to maintain that all of the revelation is unintentional. Generally the speaker is trying to present a mask—a picture which he wants his auditors to recognize as himself. Thus much of the revelation is intentional and without ironic overtones, although in a poem of twenty-one thousand lines intentional revelation becomes increasingly double-edged and reflexive when seen from the vantage of one's conception of the total poem.

All but one of the monologists in the poem strive to create an effect. The most flagrant examples are Guido (in both books), the lawyers, and Tertium Quid; these speakers are highly self-conscious, and tend to be intensely aware of the images they use.

Guido first fights for life by painting himself as injured (physically and psychically), valiant, driven; and

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<sup>1</sup>Honan, p. 169.

second fights for equanimity in the face of death by putting on the mask of the energetic, passionate, defiant, unregenerate villain. None of these qualities are to be found in him: he is clever but craven, misled but misleading. In both efforts to create a false impression he freely crosses the line separating truth and falsehood. Honan notes this hazy distinction between metaphor and perjury:

Imagery itself is an excellent rhetorical instrument for the liar who is troubled by the knowledge that his auditors are already apprised of the true facts, and Guido depends upon images to an extent that no other speaker in The Ring and the Book save Bottini does: he uses them consistently to express rather than merely to illustrate or to embellish his meaning.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Guido is a poet—he integrates, unifies his images. He is, moreover, a self-conscious imagist: in his second monologue (XI, 1176), for example, he calls attention to his use of the wolf-sheep image.

The highly deliberate and explicit stylistic emphases of the lawyers need no illustration. As for Tertium Quid, Honan perceives him astutely when he mentions certain aspects of the speaker's style as evidence of his attempt to ingratiate himself with his audience: his "extravagant multiple compounds...are so elaborate, so plainly contrived, that they seem the result of a self-conscious act";<sup>2</sup> and his syntactical balance and symmetry reflect "his lack of concern for what

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<sup>1</sup> Honan, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

he says and considerable concern for how he says it."<sup>1</sup>

Instructive contrasts may be drawn between the speaker of Book IV and both the hero and the villain of the poem. Caponsacchi diligently strives to create an effect on the Court, but his effort is unselfish. He seeks to damn Guido for murdering, and the Court for giving him an opportunity to murder, Pompilia. The divergence in motivation behind these productions of desired effects is revealed in the trivial matter of the precise form of a title. With his scrupulous observation of the dignities due those with whom he wants to be familiar, Tertium Quid insists upon the correct Italian modification of a feminine noun: thus he uses "Her Eminence" (IV, 55). Caponsacchi's only concern for what the Judges think of him revolves around his fear that they will think badly of Pompilia for having asked the aid of a man who cannot control his emotions. Thus, not caring to ingratiate himself with the Court, he uses the more natural form of address, "His Eminence" (VI, 1724). The tonal contrast between two passages in Books IV and V indicates differences between Tertium Quid and Guido. The former represents the latter's reaction to the confession of Pompilia's illegitimacy:

—my name  
 Given to a cur-cast mongrel, a drab's brat,  
 A beggar's bye-blow,—thus depriving me  
 Of what yourselves allege the whole and sole  
 Aim on my part i' the marriage,—money to-wit. (IV,  
 607-11)

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<sup>1</sup>Honan, p. 279.



The diction is remarkably similar in Guido's version:

Pompilia, I supposed their daughter, drew  
 Breath first 'mid Rome's worst rankness, through the deed  
 Of a drab and a rogue, was by-blow bastard-babe  
 Of a nameless strumpet, passed off, palmed on me  
 As the daughter with the dowry. Daughter? Dirt  
 O' the kennel! Dowry? Dust o' the street! Naught more,  
 Naught less, naught else but--oh--ah--assuredly  
 A Franceschini and my very wife! (V, 766-73)

The "--oh--ah--" of l. 772 is not alone in signifying the greater passion of the latter passage. The heavy alliteration of Guido's speech breaks the lines and slows the rhythm, making the utterance much more tortured than that of Tertium Quid, who cannot even render a scene dramatically for fear his interlocutors will think that he has abandoned his lofty impartiality and descended to take a vulgar stand.

The exemption from the class of self-conscious imagists is Pompilia. Honan remarks that "her imaging unlike that of the other monologists tends to reflect her utter lack of attention to its character-revealing significance."<sup>1</sup>

Honan notes other uses of imagery to delineate character, among them the assignment to Tertium Quid of images suggesting that he is a gentleman farmer. But *Other Half-Rome* uses far more farming images than does the speaker of Book IV. His preoccupation with fertilizers, plants, streams for irrigation and milling, butchery, and animals in general indicates the possibility that these are vocational concerns.

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<sup>1</sup>Honan, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

Browning's technique for creating characters is extremely subtle in The Ring and the Book, where, in addition to the consistent and telling accuracy of small, suggestive details, there is the added meaning which accrues to these details through their repeated use. The poet's success is such that the characters seem all of a piece—so consistent as to tempt the judgment that they are less subtle than the technique used to present them. This rather unfortunate success is accentuated in this poem because of the melodramatic plot and the ultimate judgment delivered on it and on those characters who acted it. The negative capability usually recognized as the peculiar genius of dramatic artists, and usually demonstrated by Browning in his shorter monologues, is tempered in The Ring and the Book, the length of which provides ample opportunity to make the final judgment of the poem implicit in all its parts. The poem reaches its philosophical climax in Book X, but this climax has been prepared for by the poet's explicit statement in Book I as well as by the personalities of the participants and commentators. This infusion of the ultimate judgment throughout the diverse parts of the poem is the source of its amazing unity. One of the manifestations of this consistency and one of the techniques of this unity is the resonance which arises out of the repetition of images—the creation of image patterns—carefully integrated with the plot and the theme of the poem.

Two critics have addressed themselves to this issue.

Honan finds Bottini and Guido

unsympathetic...yet we have an extremely definite impression of [them] as characters. Their portraits do not fail, but their characters appear to be prejudged by Browning. They are static.<sup>1</sup>

He finds the cause of this alienation of sympathy in what he terms false images--images striking in isolation, but inconsistent in the wider context of the monologue--or, in the case of The Ring and the Book, of the total context of the poem.<sup>2</sup> The determination of falsity is a product of resonance; and the concept of a false image supports Honan's method (which I have imitated) of moving from general impression to specific supporting detail. The other critic who comments on the issue of unity, judgment, and objectivity is Miss West, who, in a perceptive paper, attempts to reconcile the poet's optimism with his interest in criminal psychology--his philosophy with his art. She finds in the former the cause of the latter: his philosophy, when faced by evil, had to search it minutely to find where it went wrong, how it could have been saved. His delving attitude resulted in the full personality and tragic stature of his villains.<sup>3</sup> Her opinion answers suggestively, if not conclusively, those who praise Browning's analytical over his unifying talent. Moreover, it indicates a cause behind that latter talent--a consistent point of view which would allow him to build the

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<sup>1</sup>Honan, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>3</sup>E. D. West, "One Aspect of Browning's Villains," in Browning Studies, edited by Edward Berdoe, (London, 1895), pp. 106-129.

kind of resonance which I have been demonstrating.

The poem, ultimately, is about truth and judgment based on an accurate perception of truth. Browning found the evidence almost equally balanced in the Old Yellow Book.<sup>1</sup> Yet the final effect of the poem made from that Book is one of simplistic extremes. The Pope sees the essentially simple truth and sends Guido to his death to avenge Pompilia's injured goodness and innocence. But this clearest vision of the poem does not permit a pardon for Caponsacchi. The world—which only imperfectly perceives truth—must be placated. And here arises the complexity which Browning found in his source. Partial sight and practical goals led the lawyers, whose pleadings and letters comprise the Old Yellow Book, to obscure the truth. This clouding of the star of truth, this coloring of its white light, is inescapably human. The action of the poem is simple; it is the actors who render simplicity complex. Saint George, the dragon, the lady, and the supporting actors who present them, are too human to conform to the starkness of the plot. Browning's genius lay in his ability to create this human tangle with all its ramifications. From the simplicity of melodrama springs the complexity of art. Imagery plays a vital role in that mysterious transformation.

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<sup>1</sup>Cook, p. 3.

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