CHAPTER - VI

CONCLUSION
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In the concluding book of The Ring and the Book, the poet says,

"...., that our human speech is nought,
Our human Testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind.
Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.

(XII. 834-840).

The above lines seem to employ a paradox in the sense that human speech perishes the moment it comes out. This pessimistic view of language is juxtaposed with the glory and good of art. Art speaks truth.

In order to make sense of the paradox involved in the passage under discussion and also to substantiate the truth embodied in such a long poem as The Ring and the Book, we have to consider the nature and function of art as Browning understood and practised it.

In his essay on Shelley, Browning speaks of two kinds of poets, the objective and the subjective, and
says, "It would be idle to inquire, of these two kinds of poetic faculty in operation, which is higher or even rarer endowment.

If the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age, the objective in the strictest state, must still retain its original value. For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike that we shall always have to concern ourselves: the world is not to be learned and thrown aside, but, reverted to and relearned. The spiritual comprehension may be infinitely subtilised but the raw material it operates upon, must remain."¹ The preceding citation suggests that Browning prefers objectivity to subjectivity and objectivity is the basis of all dramatic art. In this context we are reminded of Fra Lippo's words in the poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi':

"....! This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:"

To find its meaning is my meat and drink.¹

One may dismiss this view of the world as thoughtless optimism. But the import of the passage in the context of the poem and in terms of the passage we have cited earlier appears to be that art or poetry may not define truth about the world and ourselves, but help us to reach it. Or as the poet says, "Art - wherein no wise speaks to men, / Only to mankind, - Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word. (XII, 854-859). From the preceding lines it may be inferred that the truth art obliquely conveys is not personal or individual but general, or in terms of the passage under review, art speaks not to men, but to mankind.

From the perspective outlined in the foregoing paragraphs, it appears that the Old Yellow Book which

the poet read and analysed meticulously, constitutes the world he had learned but did not throw away. He reverts to it and relearns it in the sense that he transmutes it into art or the ring. The Roman murder case, the facts of which are explicitly stated in the Old Yellow Book, may be construed as a piece of history. Arguing that there is a close resemblance between the views of Ezra Pound and Browning in their understanding and use of history for poetic uses, Jacob Korg says, "Browning, drawing upon the ideas of the "Defence" in his essay on Shelley, suggested that the knowledge of a time when factual information was abundant but disordered should be consolidated through the organizing power of poetic perception. History may be regarded as an instance of such knowledge; it is a particularly crucial instance because it belongs (or belonged) to actuality and is subject to common agreement, so that the poets' interpretation of it must compete with other opinions. The aim of Browning's historical poetry, as
Pound understood, was neither factual accuracy nor pure self-expression, but a conception of truth arising from the interpretation of historical material and poetic imagination united in new genre that combine the validity of the first with the vitality of the second. As readers of Browning's poems, we are concerned with how the poetic imagination interpreted the facts of the case. The vitality of a poem, as we know, rests on the imaginative interpretation of the characters involved in the case and the motives that inspire their action. The crux of the matter, as William Clyde De Vane puts it, is as follows:

"The fact that Guido had committed the deed was easily established, but more difficult questions arose, chief of which was the one appearing on the title page of the Old Yellow Book, 'Whether and when

a Husband may kill his adulterous Wife without incurring the ordinary penalty'. This opened again the question which the courts had never considered settled, as to whether Pompilia had committed adultery with Caponsacchi. In short, the whole question of the past conduct and characters of the Comperini Guido, Pompilia and Caponsacchi was thrown open in order that the court may arrive at a decision as to whether Guido was justified in any way whatever in his triple murder. The pleadings of the lawyers for the prosecution and the defence make up the text, in large part, of the Old Yellow Book. 4 The legal, moral, and philosophical issues, the Old Yellow Book, in a way a historical document, raises may not be resolved unless they are brought to a synthesis through an imaginative focus. Art cannot emerge from a vacuum. As Browning puts it:

Man's breath were vain to light a virgin wick, -
Half burned-out, all but quite-quenched wicks o' the lamp
Stationed for temple - service on this earth,

These indeed let him breathe on and relume! For such man's feat is, in the due degree, Mimic creation, galvanism for life, But still a glory portioned in the scale (I-728-734).

The purpose of the poet is to breathe on and relume half-burned-out wicks of the lamp. Or to change the metaphor the poet can detach a part of his soul and may launch it on the waïte ways of the world and in the process may come across a "fragment of a whole," "a rag of flesh" or a "scrap of bone in dim disuse" and promptly enter it, spark like, and make them live. In the process of rejuvenating the Roman murder case and obliquely suggesting the subtler dynamics of action and motive involved in it, the poet formalises the history. But, as we have noted earlier, in dramatising the facts in terms of his own conceptual framework the artist has to compete with the opinion of others about the facts. Aware of this, Browning takes immense care to present his perspective in Book I of the poem. Without making
an explicit statement, he says that the Roman murder
case is a tragic piece and he characterises Pompilia's
parents as, "Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best/
Part God's way, part the other way than God's" (I.523-524).
He tells us that a dark brotherhood inhabits Guido's home,
and his kinsmen, Abate Paul, and Canon Girolamo, are
priests only in the name, and their behaviour mocks God.
Caponsacchi is like Saint George in armour. He also tells
us that the other half of Rome thought Pompilia was a
saint and martyr. The lawyer Bottinij"Pompilia's patron
by the Chance the hour/Tomorrow her persecutor" (I.1565-66).
But the poet's perspective doesn't dominate and intrude
on our experience of reading the speeches of the citizens
of Rome, its lawyers, the chief characters and the Pope.
As monologues they seem to have an autonomous status but
what makes them a part of the larger whole is that their
speeches overlap, and converge on Pompilia's birth, marriage,
flight and death. While the monologues are constructed
and constituted on a psychological principle, in the
sense that psycho-dramatic design is an inter-related tissue of character-motive-action, they are subtly fused with the socio-cultural milieu of the time. As Robert Langbaum points out, "The ultimate origin of crime in the poverty and vice out of which Pompilia was born, and in the property system which caused the Comparini to acquire Pompilia in order to preserve their claim to an inheritance; the cynical marriage barter of Pompilia's money for Guido's title; the precedents of injustice and abuse of privilege that Guido relied on and that were amply fulfilled by the decision of the Tuscan court in his favour; the failure of Church and State authorities to help Pompilia, forcing her to turn to Caponsacchi; the shameful conduct of the Roman convent that sheltered Pompilia, then sought after her death to defame her in order to inherit her property; the presence in the Church of men like Guido and his brothers; the brutality of Guido's peasants, which Guido first used to his advantage then found turned against him - these are signs that the old order has died from within though the dead machinery
But what is significant from our point of view is the way in which Guido and his kinsmen and their supporters try to exploit the dead machinery to further their own ends and legitimise an illegitimate act. This suggests the basic unity of the poem is to be sought not in the arrangement of the twelve books of the poem, but in the psycho-dramatic design in which the character-motive-action problematic is synchronised with the legal feudal and ecclesiastical machinery. As Isobel Armstrong rightly observes, "the total context of each monologue gives the words a meaning which then undergoes successive shifts and gradations of value as the poem proceeds, shifts which are all the more surprising because the formulations are so ostensibly alike. In the event the reputation is never exact because the meaning of the word is transformed. Language is the only precise index of value, if we are forced back upon sensing the moral

feel of each monologue, and so the poem is intensely concerned with the corruption of language, values which debase language, and language which debases value.⁶

The foregoing critical observation can be illustrated so as to reinforce the point that the poem is a unified and integrated whole even though its amazing length is sustained by a device of repetition. Let us for example, review the language each speaker employs in describing Caponsacchi and his relationship with Pompilia. Half-Rome says:

And love
Did in a trice turn up with life and light,-
The man with aurole, sympathy mad flesh,
The all-consoling Caponsacchi, Sir!
A priest - what else should the consoler be?
With goodly shoulderblade and proper leg,
A portly make a symmetric shape,
And curls that clustered to the tonsure quite.
This was a bishop in the bud, and now

A canon full-blown so far; priest and priest
No wise exorbitantly overworked.
The courtly christian, not so much Saint Paul
As a saint of Caesar's household, there posed he
Sending his god-glance after his shot shaft,
Apollos turned Apollo, while the snake
Pompilia writhed transfixed through all her spires.

(II. 773-787).

The speaker in the Half-Rome, voices the opinion
of a multitude whose sense of honour is nothing more
than a vulgarised version of male domination. The lines
under consideration exhibit the priest as a voluptuous
man. He is a "courtly christian", a "canon full-blown".
The verb 'posed' does the intended damage thereby sugges-
ting that the priest, makes good use of his charm to dest-
roy innocence. While the Half-Rome distorts the meaning
of the priest and saint, the Other Half-Rome restores
them to their original value. When he says, "It were
improbable; /So is the legend of my patron-Saint."
Guido uses words like 'paramour' to characterise the
priest compares him to Paris and says that Caponsacchi
is "a brisk priest who is versed in Ovid's art." But the priest himself tells us that he "read the breviary and wrote the rhymes," and we all know that many priests have written verse but Guido seizes the fact to damn the priest. Caponsacchi never thought that he played the role of Saint George, in rescuing Pompilia. But her dubious friends like Canon Conti tell Pompilia, fully aware of Guido's cunning forgery of Pompilia's signature to correspond with Caponsacchi, that she is a Princess and only the priest like a warrior-saint can rescue her from Guido. But the entire picture is placed in its proper perspective by the Pope who compliments the priest saying: "Thou, whose sword-hand was used to strike the lute,/ whose sentry-station graced some wanton's gate,/Thou dist push forward and show mettle, shame/The laggards, and retrieve the day. Well done." (X. 1196-1198).

The above analysis reinforces the point that one of the longest poems in the English Language is a coherently wrought verbal construct and requires a careful reading. As we have noted earlier the dramatic monologue as theorised and practised by Browning is a psycho-dramatic tissue with a multi-layered meaning. Although, the facts of the Roman murder case are expli-
citly contained in the Old Yellow Book, it is the poetic imagination that transmuted the facts into a poem. To label The Ring and the Book as a novel in verse may not be an appropriate comment on its texture and craftsmanship. It may be granted that The Ring and the Book has a narrative base. But this narrative base is absorbed by the generic qualities of the new genre in which fact and fiction are so fused that the reader is under the constant pressure of the fiction, the meaning of which is to be discovered as the interaction of character, motive and action that constitutes the fiction.