CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
In Bishop Blougram's Apology the Bishop says:

You see one lad O'erstride a chimney-stack;
Him you must watch - he's sure to fall, yet stands!
Our interests on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murder,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books-
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway - one step aside.
They're classed and done with. 1

What the Bishop says about himself in the lines we have just cited is, to a large extent, true of his creator. Browning is interested in the dangerous edge of things. One may wonder why crime, say murder, appears interesting to a successful poet like Browning. In the words of Nicolas Freling, "Murder, or any other crime, is not a part of entertainment but an integral part of life. We are all murderers, we are all spies, we are all criminals, and to choose crime as the main spring of a book's action is only to find, one of the simplest ways of focusing eyes on our

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life and the world."² Browning seems to be interested in crime not as a detective but as an artist and explores the psychology of crime from an aesthetic perspective. Edward Dowden tells us that "Browning's father is said to have taken unusual interest in the investigation of complex criminal cases. The son inherited the like curiosity in the study of facts and motives connected with crime. The late Mr. Kegan Paul told in his Memories of a dinner-party where the conversation turned on murder. Browning surprised him by showing his acquaintance to the minutest detail with every cause celebre of that kind within living every cause celebre of that kind within living memory."³ As a poet Browning creates a number of characters whose potentiality for crime is unmistakable. Moreover, he created criminals like the Duke in 'My Last Duchess' and Guido in The Ring and the Book. In fact The Ring and the Book is based on the Roman murder case, all the details of which Browning got from the Old Yellow Book. After reading the poem


³ Edward Dowden ed., 'Introduction' to The Ring and the Book (London, Oxford University Press, 1940), p. X.
Carlyle seems to have said, "I re-read it all through - all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines and only wants forgetting." One can understand the irritation of Carlyle because the same story is repeated in all the twelve books of the poem. We don’t generally come across a parallel to the aesthetic strategy employed in *The Ring and the Book*, except in the fiction of Conrad and Faulkner. Employing the Conradian device, Faulkner makes Benjy, Quenten, Jason and the narrator tell the story of Caddy’s loss of virginity in *The Sound and the Fury*. The same device is used in *Absalom, Absalom* and in *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner’s narrative method seems to suggest that in the process of narrating the same tale, different narrators suggest different ways of making sense of the same tale. Browning seems to feel that the same truth is exploited by men and women to further their own ends. It is obvious that they are not interested in truth for its own sake. In the Roman murder case, for example, Guido who murders his young wife, Pompeilia, states that he killed her but would like to escape from the penal

consequences of his act by referring to the same truth. The word 'truth' recurs throughout the book; so also, the words 'fact and fiction'. It would be a mistake to think that fiction is untrue. One of the assumptions of artistic endeavour behind the poem is that art is a more appropriate medium for conveying truth because art or poetry is the consequence of an intuitive and imaginative fusion of fact and fiction. This is very well suggested by the title of the poem, The Ring and the Book. A ring is made not from pure gold but out of a combination of gold and gold's alloy. Without the alloy, the ring can't be given its proper shape. Hence the shape is the result of proper combination of gold and alloy. After the ring has acquired its solidity and shape, the goldsmith can separate both by sprinkling acid. Keeping in view the signification of the metaphor, let us turn to the following lines:

Here it is, this I toss and take again;
Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript;
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.  

(I. 83-87)

The Old Yellow Book in small quarto size, "part print and part manuscript" has a shape of its own. But it is not an aesthetic form as we understand it. Moreover, it contains pure crude facts associated with a violent act that took place two centuries ago. History or facts about a past event have a limited relevance. But form as we understand it, or in terms of the metaphor of "the ring" we have been considering, has a perennial relevance.

II

Browning gives a perennial relevance to the Roman murder case by fusing fact and fiction. Many readers of the poem have noticed that the poem is sustained by a scaffolding in which the Andromeda - Perseus myth and the Golden Legend of Saint George are brought together. According to the poem, it is on Saint George’s day that CaponSacchi, the priest, helps Pompilia to escape from the cruelty of her husband. We are told that the Andromeda - Perseus myth had fascinated Browning all through his life. The Ethiopian king, Cepheus, exposes his daughter, Andromeda to the wrath of a serpent in order to appease the deities. Andromeda, the virgin, chained to a rock was crying out of
fear. Perseus, hovering over her, comes down, releases her, and kills the monster or the serpent that came to attack them. One may wonder whether Browning thought that he was a sort of Perseus in releasing Elizabeth Barrett from the clutches of her father. But he would have been touched by everything that corresponded between him and the mythical hero. He might have felt the relevance of Saint George’s legend in terms of his own personal experience. In *The Ring and the Book* there are explicit references to both. But this should not rush us to the conclusion that we have a mythic pattern in the poem. For one thing, the poem has a sound realistic base. Hence what we have in the poem is the suggestivity of the myth, in a realistic context. Moreover, we should not go to the extent of saying that the poem dramatizes a murder case in terms of the canons of realism, the kind of realism we associate with the Victorian novel.

III

If it be granted that the poet, while transmuting the tragic murder of a girl-cum-wife into an imaginative
construct, discovers the meaning of the events contained in the Old Yellow Book, his discovery by itself may not have the authenticity of truth. Aware of this, the poet recreates a multiple perspective in which the opinion of others and the voice of the populace are given due weight and consideration. In the opening book there are innumerable suggestions concerning the attitude the poet adopted towards Pompilia's murder. Referring to one of the segments of the Roman public he says:

...'t is there -
The instinctive theorizing whence a fact
Looks to the eye as the eye Look." (I. 854-856)

Any theorizing proceeds from not the facts available or given but from the attitude of the investigator and the perspective he brings to bear on the facts. Half-Rome finds Guido excusable. The other Half-Rome expresses soft sentiments for Pompilia and finds Guido guilty. Teritium Guid (a third something) with a critical mind analyses the pros and cons of the case but reserves the judgement or leaves it to his audience. All these three constitute the public voice, and the public voice, as is often expected, has only
a superficial view of what reality is, or in terms of the lines cited earlier, the facts appear to them as they like them to appear. Apart from these, the poet refers to the opinions of the lawyers--which are equally distorted and viciated.

Half-Rome all through his speech uses his language in such a way that the entire tale looks like a cheap and sensational comedy, the theme of which is 'Honoris-Causa.' He brings our attention to the fact that the next day after the murder:

From dawn till now that it is growing dusk,
A multitude has flocked and filled the Church,
Coming and going, coming back again,
Till to court creaked one. Rome was at the show.
People climbed up the columns, fought for spikes O' the chapel-rail to perch themselves upon,
Jumped over and so broke the wooden work painted like porophyry to deceive the eye;
Serve the priests right! The organ-loft was crammed,
Women were fainting, no few fights ensued,
In short, it was a show repaid your pains;

(I. 87-97)
The above passage is significant for two reasons. One is it is realistic enough. The other is that like any crowd, the Roman crowd is excited to see the mutilated bodies of Guido's victims. Moreover, it brings to the fore the speaker's itch for sensationalism who considers the whole thing as a show (used twice in the passage) that repays one's pains. In his assessment of the situation, he brings in the Genesis myth and compares Caponsacchi to Lucifer, Pompilia to Eve and Guido to Adam. In the same breath he refers to Pietro and Violante as Adam and Eve and says that Violante (Eve) doesn't want her rule over Pietro (Adam) to decline. He doesn't fail to mention Pompilia's great eyes, and bounty of black hair. The image of 'bait' and 'hook' and the word 'catch' and its analogues and terms like 'market-place,' 'barter,' that are often repeated in his speech suggest that Pompilia's murder is not a morally significant event, but as Carlyle thought, an Old Bailey story which is farcical and deserves to be quickly forgotten. All this seems to stem from the fact that Half-Rome has an innate suspicion of women and their integrity and is obsessed with the feminine viles. He himself is not sure of his wife's fidelity which he sadly articulates in the concluding lines of his speech:
And one life left: for where's the Canon's corpse?
All which is the worse for Guido, but, be frank —
The better for you and me and all the world,
Husbands of wives, especially in Rome.
The thing is put right, in the old place, —ay,
The rod hangs on its nail behind the door,
Fresh from the brine: a matter I commend
To the notice, during Carnival that's near,
Of a certain what's-his-name and jackanapes
Somewhat too civil of eves with lute and song
About a house here, where I keep a wife

(HI. 1525 - 1535).

Half-Rome's attitude stems from his fear that his wife may deceive him. The Other Half-Rome is a bachelor and has great sympathy for Pompilia which expresses itself in the opening lines of his speech:

Another day that finds her living yet,
Little Pompilia with the patient brow'
And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
And, under the white hospital-array,
A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
You 'd think, yet now, stabbed through and through again,
Alive, i' the ruins. 'T is a miracle

(III.1-7)
The adjectives that qualify Pompilia, in the passage we have just cited - 'little', 'patient', 'lamentable', 'poor', 'flower like' - we come across throughout his speech. Although he doesn't exonerate the Comparini couple for their sinful acts he thinks that Guido practises ruffianism and is incapable of showing love and kindness. He compares Guido to a wolf and in a very interesting passage compares him to a dog. His behaviour, after the flight of Pompilia, evokes the Other-Half-Rome's disgust.

As he says:

The husband - how he ne'er showed teeth at all,
Whose bark had promised biting; but just sneaked
Back to his Kennel, tail twixt legs, as 't were, -

(II. 1453-1455).

Half-Rome and the Other Half-Rome are at least positive in their conclusions. Tertium Quid appears to be a man of the world and doesn't want to be explicit in his opinion. We notice civility, candour, critical intelligence in Tertium Quid. But, these qualities of civility are not placed in the service of truth and justice. He thinks that the entire tale is a mixture of tragedy and farce and some-
thing can be said in defence or against both the sides. A careful scrutiny of Ter tium Quid's speech reveals that he is capable of marshalling the arguments but not capable of seeing through them. He seems to have no conviction in what he says and this is very well revealed in the penultimate paragraph of his speech:

The long and the short is, truth seems what I show:
Undoubtedly no pains ought to be spared
To give the mob an inkling of our lights.
It seems unduly harsh to put the man
To the torture, as I hear the court intends,
Though readiest way of twisting out the truth;
He is noble, and he may be innocent.
On the other hand, if they exempt the man
(As it is also said they hesitate
On the fair ground, presumptive guilt is weak
I' the case of nobility and privilege),-
What crime that ever was, ever will be,
Deserves the torture? Then abolish it!
You see the reduction ad absurdum, Sirs?

(IV. 1608-1621)

IV

As we have seen the evaluation of Half-Rome, the other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid, representing the Roman
public, is undecided, divided and is devoid of any sense of value. It is the evaluation of a crowd that drifts in a moral vacuum. But when we turn to the lawyers whose legal acumen and experience are supposed to illuminate the crucial issues involved in Pompilia's murder, we find that they are more corrupt than the Roman public. Dominis Hyacinthus De Archangelis who defends Guido, is a selfish and self-centred character. He is not interested in or convinced of Guido's goodness and sincerity. He thinks that Guido's trial gives him an opportunity to exhibit his learning because it may set a good example to his son. He makes an excessive use of Latin terms, which in a way, obfuscate his sense. He repeats the opinion of Half-Rome and says:

It should be always harder to convict, In short, than to establish innocence. Therefore we shall demonstrate first of all That honor is a gift of God to man Precious beyond compare: which natural sense Of human rectitude and purity, - Which white, man's soul is born with, - brooks no touch: Therefore, the sensitivest spot of all
Wounded by any wafture breathed from black,
Is-honor within honor, like the eye
Centred i' the ball - the honor of our wife.

(VIII. 448-458)

While Guido's advocate tamely repeats the popular view and supports it by a contrived misinterpretation of the actuality involved, Pompilia's advocate, with an unscrupulous professionalism, makes use of Ovidian and other mythical and literary characters like Daphne and Salmacis, Marlowe's Hero, Chapman's Corinna, to paint Pompilia's innocence. This shows his indifference to Pompilia's suffering and agony and her ultimate tragic death. He confesses that he has a good knowledge of the classical and medieval poetry, and himself would have been a poet had it not been for a fortunate accident. We are told much later by the poet that Bottinius, who defends Pompilia's virtue, also prepares himself to defame her in order to defend the claims of the convent where she stayed before the birth of her babe, for her property because she dies as an orphan.

If we turn from the arguments of the lawyers to the law itself, it appears to be an indifferent God or a machi-
nery which does not give any boon or serves any purpose. Given the socio-cultural and the religious milieu of the later seventeenth century Rome, it appears that the legal system and institutions are not in a harmony with the catholic virtue of compassion. On the other hand, they seem to endorse the popular view of a male-dominated world. When the popular opinion and the legal opinion converge on the Roman murder case, the weakness of popular systems and the ancient systems of law and jurisprudence is made explicit. This seems to be the theme of the Pope's monologue which we have discussed at the appropriate place. Suffice it to say here that the poet brings together multiple perspectives and their implications in order to communicate the truth about Pompilia as he sees it.

Choosing the monologue and blank verse as his medium, Browning takes care to see that while all the characters talk about the same thing, it is essential that each version should have an authenticity in tune with the motives of the speaker.