CHAPTER VIII

NARRATIVE ART — THE SHORTER POEMS

Browning's narrative method in *Dramatic Idylls* is to take a character who is morally interesting and to put that character into situations that will best reveal his moral qualities. The object is to isolate the truth of the human condition, not through the oblique view where the reader has to "discover" the meaning, but through a more objective delineation of what men and women did, their manifest actions as being avenues to their secret centres. Thus the idylls display not so much "action in character" as may be said of the interior method of the dramatic monologue, but rather character and motive revealed through action, i.e. the accent is on the "succinct little story" (as Browning described a dramatic idyll)¹ rendered in all its totality by a disinterested narrator.

Browning's technique in these shorter poems is varied. In *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* the narrator was an important means of controlling our responses and his judgements were a refined and restrained projection of the author's own sensibility. In *Dramatic Idylls* there is hardly any emphasis on the personality of the

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narrator, in order to lend such commentary as he makes, (which is sparingly made, but is crucial) the air of authority and impartiality. Important exceptions are "Clive" (Second Series) where the personality of the narrator is explicitly delineated in the interests of thematic significance, and "Ned Bratts" which uses an unreliable narrator for satiric purposes. Though the narrator does not participate in the action, by his resuscitation of the event he shares imaginatively in the experience. In any living event, the pressures of the experience prevent any immediate perception of the truth behind it. Thus, in the Idylls, Browning sets out to chart the complexities of human motivation by distancing the event through the use of the narrator, who presents the action as told by the protagonists themselves. This is all the more important in the light of the extreme situations depicted.

Browning's aim is to get the truth about human nature in a very concentrated form, so he dramatizes those moments which make the inherent meaning of a life visible. The emotions depicted are basic ones like fear, anger, jealousy, joy, apathy, but Browning reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in them.
Unlike the monologuists, the characters in a dramatic idyll talk neither to defend themselves nor to persuade an auditor. Their aim is to recreate the original moment of choice; any insights which emerge are generally hidden from them. It is the narrator's function, either by direct comment or by the presentation of relevant subsidiary material to elucidate them for the reader.

The First Series reveals Browning's subtle technique of conditioning the reader's response. Having relegated the narrator to the background in these narratives, he achieves depth through a different method—focusing a double perspective on each event, sometimes external to the main character, sometimes as a part of his own consciousness.

"Martin Relph" depicts the tragic irony of a man who is forced to retreat behind conventional assumptions to escape from his own conscience. To foil "a worm inside which bores at the brain for food!" (1.14) Martin prefers to call himself a coward, rather than acknowledge the enormity of the crime which he has committed, and which has been little short of cold-blooded murder. The narrative describes not only Martin's excited state of mind, but effectively presents the tensions of the story's
central event—the arrival of Vincent Parkes with the letter which would rescue Rosamund Page from the firing squad, and Martin's deliberate failure to act 'When a word, cry, gasp would have rescued both' (1.137). The sudden shift to the present tense at the climax enhances the dramatic vividness of the action, and aids the simultaneous presentation of action and emotion. The crisis is ostensibly an external one, but its repercussions take place deep within a man's soul. The action is important, but Browning's concern is equally with what the event meant to the main character, what difference it made in him. Martin Relph is led to insights from which he ordinarily shields himself—namely that his action has had quite the reverse effect from what he had intended it to have: 'I helped you; thus were you dead and wed' (p.113). The narrative tension is slackened at this point by presenting the scene through a hubbub of spectator voices, before the final climatic revelation. Browning secures maximum shock effect by withholding the true cause of Martin's heinous crime till almost the end—his love for the girl and his jealousy of her lover; so that the last two verses in which Martin tries to gloss over his real motivations are not only ironical but splendid examples of psychological realism.
In 'Pheidippides' we start immediately inside the particular situation, at a particular moment, as it presents itself to the person involved. We gather the facts through Pheidippides' allusion to them in the course of his speech—Athens at war with Persia, Sparta's refusal to come to its aid, Pan's timely promise of help. The account of his triumph, however, has a better chance of being appreciated as factual if it does not seem too personal. Thus, its authenticity is emphasized by the shift in the point of view from protagonist to narrator. This shift also helps the reader to stand back from the action and to assess the moral value of the character. The herdsm of Pheidippides, contrasted with the selfishness of those in power creates the perspective from which emerges the moral implications of the Idyll, and it is the narrator who is entrusted with the task of elucidation: "...yet never decline, but, gloriously as he began,/So to end gloriously—"(I.114).

In 'Halbert and Hob', which enacts the mythic rite of initiation inexplicably gone awry, Browning exposes the strangeness of the sudden transformation that weakens the brute force of the father and son, so that time almost stops and their lives begin to weaken and fade away. Animality is destroyed by the expression
of civilized restraint. Civilization has broken down savagery. Old Halbert recognizes in this "the finger of God" (1.50). The quotation from King Lear ("Is there a reason in nature for these hard hearts"), leads to direct comment by the narrator on the mystery of the forces within and without man. As with the image of the "worm" in Martin Relph” and that of fire in 'Pheidippides' the implications of the tale are dramatically embodied in the vivid image of the son "crouched all a-tremble like any lamb new-yeaned" (1.59).

In "Ivan Ivanovitch" the action is set in times past to enhance its significance: "We place it in Peter's time when hearts were great not small" (1.15). Further, the contrasted images of hatchet and tool-box create a double frame of reference (elemental innocence versus artificial codes) which will be needed to judge the implications of the action. The narrator's voice vouching for its authenticity and speaking of "a moral that's behind" (1.13), solidly discounts any air of unreality that the tale might bear. Roma A. King sees the setting as symbolic: "The little village, an oasis of semi-civilization is surrounded by the wolf-infested forest", so that in the idyll the conflict is between the "clearing and the wilderness, the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious".²

². The Focusing Artifice, p.219.
The actual tale is told by the woman herself, the sharply limited point of view being superbly employed, as in Conrad's tales, for securing an effect of nightmare vividness. The carefully controlled tempo of the narrative, the fragmented jerkiness of the language objectifying the terrified reactions of the woman, the building up of suspense and cumulative heightening of tension make this idyll unique. The dramatic compression that gives simultaneously, action, emotion and the material to judge both is here impressively employed, as in: "Flings? I flung? Never! But think!—a woman, after all! Contending with a wolf!" (1.173). Emotion is dramatically externalized in one poignant image:

...how feels
The onion bulb your knife parts, pushing through its peels,
Till out you scoop its clove wherein lie its stalk and leaf
And bloom and seed unborn? (11.234-37)

Roma A. King is correct when he says that the woman's monologue reveals "the cruelty beneath the tenderness, the selfishness beneath the love". But one cannot agree with him when he says that the woman "sees herself from a new perspective", for the experience has brought her

3. The Focusing Artifice, p.221.
no spiritual regeneration. She remains ensconced in her selfishness—"Life's sweet, and all its after-years" (1.253).

The very violence of Ivan's act of beheading the woman, matched as it is with the violence of the woman's act of throwing her babies at the wolves, creates a moral dilemma. No single judgement would suffice to explain completely the paradoxical nature of each act. Browning thus crosses three viewpoints: Ivan's ("God bade me act for him; I dared not disobey"); (1.297) the judge's ("Ivan Ivanovitch has done a deed that's named/Murder by law and me") 11.315-16; and the old Pope's ("I proclaim/Ivan Ivanovitch God's servant") 11.389-90. Thus, there is truth as the world sees it, and the inner truth revealed by an imaginative leap made possible by experience and an enlarged consciousness, and these tiered judgments form the base of the poem's moral significance. Ultimately, what emerges as praiseworthy is the courage and vigour of Ivan's convictions, which stand out in sharp contrast to the contradictions in the woman's attitude as a woman and a mother.

In "Tray" Browning shows how the so-called rational, scientific frame of mind may be perverted and grotesque in contrast to simple impulses. His
The essential concern in the *Dramatic Idylls* with the unpredictability of human nature is once again the theme of "Ned Bratts". Instead of using the story to highlight the moral complexities of a single crucial moment, Browning in this poem seems to use the story to emphasize the complexities inherent in religious feeling. There is an aura of melodrama about Ned Bratts and his wife and a savage comedy inherent in their viciousness which reveals itself so uninhibitedly. Yet, even while they are depicted as monstrous, there is an underlying sympathy, for their intuitive reactions to their particular testing moment has been for them a means of salvation. The key-note to their portrayal is "Take the will, not the deed" (1.449) External manifestations are deceptive:

Technique here is that of dissociation, the action being set first, against the past concepts of heroism, which lends a comic irony to the modern situation; and secondly, against the inconsequential babble of mildly curious, essentially indifferent onlookers, all ready to discern the irony of Tray's instinctive rescue of not only the child, but of the child's doll as well, speaking off-handedly of the cruelty of vivisection, and thus highlighting the aberrations of their own outlook that works against common humanity.
So may some stricken tree look blasted, bough and bole,
Champed by the fire-tooth, charred without,
yet, thrice-bound
With detriment about, within life may be found,
A prisoned power to branch and blossom as before,
Could but the gardener cleave the cloister,
reach the core... 

The essential flatness of the character of the two protagonists is emphasized to reveal the distortions that a simplistic interpretation of salvation may bring about. Browning here uses an unreliable narrator to reinforce the ironic intention of the poem. The coarseness of the speaker matches the obtuseness of the judges; and their inability to comprehend the true significance of Bunyan's teachings allows Browning to subtly imply the ironies behind the 'happy hanging'.

The poem is also an indictment of a society that has no compunctions about jailing a man and then erecting him a statue. Browning's satire is directed against the legal profession:

What if I had my doubts? Suppose I gave them breath,
Brought you to bar: what work to do, ere 'Guilty, Death'
Had paid our pains! What heaps of witnesses to drag
From holes and corners, paid from out the country's bag!
Trial three dog-days long!

This satire becomes all the more trenchant because of the approval which this manner of thinking receives from the narrator. The complacent, self-satisfied attitude of the
narrator and the judge contrasts tellingly with the fervour of feeling, however grotesque, that motivates Ned Bratts to insist on a quick hanging to speed him on his way to heaven. This is in keeping with Browning's emphasis in the Idylls on the moral superiority of decisive action as against lethargy or excessive ratiocination.

Browning's narrative technique in the Dramatic Idylls, Second Series aims at reinforcing the main theme of the volume—the virtual impossibility of being "sage and certain" about man's innermost being. The increased emphasis on the narrator, whether as a reliable or unreliable spokesman, points to an increased sophistication in narrative presentation.

"Echetlos" is structured upon contrasts, both visual and moral—the men in the "tribe and file" (1.5) contrasted with the one "who kept no rank" (1.7), the "helmed and shielded" (1.10) set against the "clown's limbs broad and bare" (1.11). Though the significance of Echetlos' action is explicitly given by the oracle who pronounces: "The great deed ne'er grows small" (1.27), its moral implications are enlarged through the narrator's setting the "great deed" against the "great name"—that of the Greek heroes, Miltiades and Themistokles who came to ignoble ends.
It is generally accepted among critics that "Clive" has a place among the best of Browning's works. In fact, Browning himself chose the poem as his best in the idyllic mode. Mark Siegchrist in his study of the poem, refers to it as a subtle study of "a subtle moral quandry" and sees "Clive" both as a dramatic idyll with respect to its title role, displaying the impact of a single crucial event on an individual's insight into his own behaviour, and as a dramatic monologue with respect to its narrator, displaying a more profound self-revelation of his character than he consciously intends.

Browning's technique of narration in this poem is unique. The characterization of the hero is made significant and effective by the subjective background against which it is portrayed. The narrator is here cast in the role of the unreliable eye-witness, so that the poet lays on the reader a special burden of enjoyable ratiocination as he understands and interprets what the character telling the story cannot himself comprehend. The narrator here tries to explain Clive's thoughts and actions, but he does so in the light of his own mental

states, his preconceived notions of heroism. The poem's interest lies in the subtlety with which it portrays the difference between the sensitive, tortured Clive and the self-satisfied narrator, for whom the world holds no ambiguities. Its significance lies in the "moral discovery" to which these contrasted character-sketches point. Man is betrayed by what is false and weak within him. And it is, paradoxically, the imaginative, idealistic soul that is most prone to betrayal. The image of the castle is a significant one: "Such a castle seldom crumbles by sheer stress of cannonade" (1.56). The implication is that forces from within contribute to its decay.

The juxtaposition between appearance and reality—the romantic estimate held by the narrator of the gallant warrior "every whit/Worth your Alexanders, Caesars, Marlboroughs" (1.72) and the reality of the decaying figure of Clive—"I saw his head sink heavy, guessed the soul's extinguishment/By the glazing eyeball, noticed how the furtive fingers went/Where drug-box skulked behind the honest liquor" (11.65-67), or, in other words, the contrast between what might be termed the public view and the private view creates the ironic tension that sustains the poem.

Through the further contrast that is presented between Clive's tale of the occasion when he felt "most fear" (1.84), and the narrator's obtuse refusal to accept the fact that his hero could feel fear, Browning probes the ambiguities behind ostensibly heroic action. We are made to realize that what Clive feared was not the matter of dying but the matter of living. Mark Siegchrist notes: "As in Conrad's fiction, people in these idylls find themselves suddenly alone confronting the heart of moral darkness, with no support other than their own strength of character, if they have any". For Clive, life without the protective aura of heroic gesture and public accolade appears to be unsupportable. His opponent's reaction in admitting that he had cheated at cards provided him with the opportunity for the grand gesture of magnanimity: "Whosoever, all or each,/To the disadvantage of the man who spared me, utters speech/To his face, behind his back,—that speaker has to do with me:" (ll.190-192), But Clive is also aware of the fact that had his opponent adopted a different stance, made the heroic gesture himself by saying:

...There!
Keep your life, calumniator!--worthless life
I freely spare:
Mine you freely would have taken—murdered me
and my good fame
Both at once—and all the better! Go, and thank
your own bad aim
Which permits me to forgive you! (ll.226-30)

nothing would have remained for him but to take his own life on the spot.

In typical Browning fashion, language becomes an important means of evaluating character. Clive's words: "I passed each speaker severally in review. When I had precise their number, names and styles, and fully knew/Over whom my supervision thenceforth must extend, why, then..." (11.178-80), reveals the extent to which Clive enjoys his position of superiority over people. Once deprived of that, his fall is inevitable.

The narrator, even while he is too obtuse to understand the real implications of Clive's confession, nevertheless unwittingly provides towards the end the moral norms against which Clive's final act of suicide must be judged. His comfortable assumptions are shaken by Clive's acceptance of suicide as an easy way out of difficulties. Though his essential faith in Clive's heroism remains, he attempts mildly to remonstrate: "True, disgrace were hard to bear: but such a rush against God's face/--None of that for me, Lord Plassy..." (11.241-42). This does not represent the superficial standards of the narrator any longer, but constitutes the unshakeable norms of morality. The narrator's ambivalence is even more pronounced in his reactions to the news of Clive's suicide;
on the one hand are his habitual assumptions that Clive has been "fearfully courageous"; on the other, a nagging suspicion that this is Clive's "worst deed". The conclusion is a masterpiece of understatement. By describing the surface reactions of the narrator, Browning leaves the reader to infer the tumult within the mind of the protagonist that may have led him to take the extreme step. It is this subtlety and suggestiveness that renders all elaboration superfluous that is Browning's most significant contribution to modern narrative art.

In "Muleykeh" the narrator functions not so much as an investigator or even commentator, but as a recounter. Nevertheless, his role as eye-witness helps to lend excitement and urgency to his narrative. His initial

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7. Conrad's view on the craft of writing is interesting in this connection: "I beg leave to illustrate my meaning from extracts .... When the whole horror of his position forced itself with an agony of apprehension upon his frightened mind, Pa Tua for a space lost his reason'.... In this sentence the reader is borne down by the full expression. The words: with an agony of apprehension completely destroy the effect—therefore interfere with the truth of the statement.... The imagination of the reader should be left free to rouse his feeling.

'...When the whole horror of his position forced itself upon his mind, Pa Tua for a space lost his reason...' This is truth; this it is which, thus stated, carries conviction because it is a picture of a mental state.'

Quoted in Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel, pp.319-20.
reaction to Hoseyn's unexpected gesture in letting his enemy into the secret of the horse Muleykeh's speed is that of surprise: "What folly makes Hoseyn shout" (1.95). Whether the narrator himself understands the implications of Hoseyn's explanatory 'And the beaten in speed!'... 'you have never loved my Pearl' " (1.114), is uncertain. The narrator's obtuseness serves the important function of emphasizing the contradictory nature of human responses. The line of action that Hoseyn has taken seems, on face value, to be utterly opposed to the whole line of his disposition as the narrator understands it. Yet, there is a psychological consistency in Hoseyn's willingness to suffer deprivation rather than accept in the object of his love anything less than complete perfection. For him, as for Browning himself, there is no place in love for compromise or selfishness, and Browning achieves dramatic intensity of effect by refraining from any attempt to explain or to justify.

In 'Pietro of Abano' the narrator is once again used to point out the moral significance of the tale. The action is set well back in the past so that the tradition itself carries its own authority. This was a necessary device, for the implications of the story were such as to touch a raw spot in the poet himself--
the public lack of recognition or adulation. The narrator's mask barely hides Browning's own voice: "Prophets pay with Christians, now as in the Jew's age/Still is--stoning" (p.614) and also the bitterly ironical: "Certain, with but these two gifts, to gain earth's prize in time!/Cleverness uncurbed by conscience" (p.622). Much of the pleasure lies in applying the implications of the poem to the poet's own situation. The poem ends with Browning ruefully commenting through his narrative persona: "Scarce the sportive fancy-dice I fling show'Venus' " (p.623) that is, love of the reading public.

"Doctor--" follows a familiar narrative pattern--a story recounted by a narrator, who in turn has heard it from somebody else. This distancing is particularly effective when the story is somewhat far-fetched, as in this tale of the powers of Satan being routed by the powers of a "bad wife". This technique allows for only that much willing suspension of disbelief as the narrator and the reader is willing to give. The grotesque tale nevertheless gives an inkling into the inherent potentialities of the human soul for either good or evil. With the last line--"I tell it, as the Rabbi told me", the narrator disowns any responsibility for the sentiments expressed in the tale.
Apart from the Dramatic Idylls, the shorter narrative poems of Browning's later period are spread over the Pacchiarotto volume (1876)—"Herve Riel", "A Forgiveness", "Cenciaja", "Fillippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial"; the Jocoseria volume (1883)—"Donald", "Solomon and Balkis", "Cristina and Monaldeschi", "Adam, Lilith and Eve": and the Asolando volume (1889)—"Rosny", "The Pope and the Net", "The Bean-Feast", "Muckle-mouth Meg", "Arcades Ambo", "The Lady and the Painter", "Ponte Dell'Angelo, Venice", "Beatrice Signorini", "Imperante Augusto Natus est---". Some of these poems are satirical in intention and so have been discussed in Chapter IV. In general, these later poems reveal the astonishing fertility of Browning's mind even in his later years. In out-of-the-way stories, anecdotes, historical titbits, he found revealing indications of man's nature and insights into the possibilities of the mind and the imagination. Browning here may be said to reveal the same "passion for exactitude, an appetite, the appetite of an ogre, for all kinds of facts" that Henry James noticed in Balzac, who incidentally, was a great favourite with Browning himself, as his letters amply show.

'"Herve Riel'" is in the tradition of '"How They Brought Good News from Ghent to Aix'' and '"Incident of the French Camp'"', a celebration of the valour of unsung, unknown heroes. Irvine and Honan note: '"Herve Riel'"... romanticizes and sentimentalizes history....One also sees impressively how many of his doctrines he, [Browning], could squeeze into a ballad that is simple and colourful enough to appeal to a child: the helplessness of institutions, the necessity of self-reliance, the redemptive value of decisive action, the supremacy of love, even the 'infinite moment' that transcends time and makes human history significant'.

'"A Forgiveness'" was chosen by Browning as most representative of his narrative poetry. It has all those features that make a good short story—shock, surprise, climax, excitement. The first section, which describes the nobleman's intense love for his wife and his discovery of her guilt, ends with the marvellously laconic '"We went in'" (1.92). Following the breathless urgency of the lady's confession, it speaks of the traumatic experience more tellingly than an analysis. The section that follows shows the man trying to evade the threat of a personal

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catastrophe by building a bulwark of an outwardly normal life style. But the sense of compulsively obsessive behaviour masquerading under the guise of normality, though underplayed with striking effect, is very strong. One feels it need but a touch to burst out horrifying into the open.

The seemingly irrelevant digressions at crucial points of the narrative not only enhance the suspense, they serve to reveal the psychology of a frustrated, hate-filled mind operating under a rigid, self-imposed code of conduct. The nobleman's morbid tendencies are revealed in his taste for "things that rend and rip, / Gash rough, slash smooth, help hate in so many ways" (11.259-60). The poem is a study of obsessional neurosis no less than that of the Duke in "My Last Duchess". Even at the moment in which he is about to murder his wife, he is able to admire with the precision of a connoisseur the beauty of the dagger he is using. The sense of shock produced by—"She sleeps, as erst/ Beloved, in this your church" (11.407-8) corresponds to that produced by the Duke in "My Last Duchess", when, as Robert Langbaum describes it, "having boasted how at his command the duchess' life was extinguished, he turns back to the portrait to admire of all things its life-likeness". 11

11. The Poetry of Experience, p.78.
The climax in which the nobleman reveals to the priest that he has recognized him as his wife's lover and then kills him, is not as unexpected as it appears. As with a successful detective story, the germ of the resolution is there in the story from the beginning. In this particular poem, Browning has carefully paved the way for the denouement through the very unexpectedness of the preliminary lines: "The monk half spoke, half ground through his clenched teeth, / At the confession-grate I knelt beneath". (1.6-7). We remember Henry James' demand that the novelist should practise a technique of "continuous relevance", and Ford Madox Ford's assertion: "Before everything a story must convey a sense of inevitability: that which happens in it must be seen to be the only thing that could have happened". In "A Forgiveness" the atmosphere of suppressed violence leads to the only conclusion possible, the killing of both wife and lover. The ironies inherent in the title of the poem are thus revealed. Ostensibly, the nobleman is asking

12. Cf. Henry James' opinion in "The Art of Fiction": "I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of Books, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art—that of being illustrative."

13. Quoted in Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel, p.245.
for forgiveness at the confessional, but in reality he is out for vengeance; ostensibly, he has forgiven his wife for her unfaithfulness, but his hate has passed away only after killing her.

In "Donald" in the Jocoseria volume, Browning once again uses a narrator whose reactions focus very clearly the meaning of the tale. The narrator is the sensitive, unbiased perceiver whose opinions cut across the conventional assumptions to the central truth. As in the dramatic idylls, a sudden critical moment of choice reveals in a character hitherto unsuspected traits. The moral value of his response judges the character. Browning here appears to modify the emphasis of swift, instinctive behaviour as the hallmark of right and truth that had characterized poems like "Ivan Ivanovitch". The motive behind the act is now seen as the crucial test. Donald's instincts are those of a hunter, not a man. He is more akin to the predatory beast than a human being. As in "Tray", the sensitive instinct of the animal is superior to the calculating motives of the man. The contrast between the run-of-the-mill belief that "where there is keeness/For sport, there's little likelihood/Of a man's displaying meanness!" (ll. 46-48) and the sordidness of tale in which a sportsman reveals his lack of honour and
humanity, is sharply ironical. But the reactions of
the listeners at the bothy heightens the irony even
further. Their obtuseness is of a piece with the
general unwillingness of men to accept any radical
change in their way of thinking.

"Solomon and Balkis" shows Browning using an
anecdote from rabbinical lore to illustrate not the
philosophy of a religious tradition, but the nature of
individuals within the tradition. The theme—the weakness
of the idealized—is a favourite one with Browning. A
parallel theme is the necessity of honestly admitting
the descendental thrust in one's nature. To spurn the
body and the senses in this world is hypocrisy. Even the
wise Solomon and the sublime Balkis at last admit to
vanity and lust.

"Cristina and Monaldeschi" treats a "crime of
passion", as DeVane calls, in a truly dramatic way,
in that it is told by one of the actors in the story
and told at a moment of crisis in the action, and not as
a recapitulation. This at once involves the reader in
the emotional movements of the narrative—a swift-paced
progression in revealment of guilt and the climatic
vengeance. The highlight of this tense, macabre drama

is the character of the proud, implacable Cristina. The imagery of the peak 'bare and bleak' (1.55) from which there is no retreat, and of 'Yawning death in yon abyss/Where the waters whirl and hiss' (11.70-71) indicate the relentless fury of a woman crossed in love. The elaborate ritual that she conducts in taking her faithless lover for a walk down the gallery in which hang the portraits of King Francis and his adored Diane, who, she observes with cutting sarcasm, are 'Prototypes of you and me' (1.12) reveals a mind obsessed, almost like that of the lady in 'The Laboratory'. Her inscrutability, sadistic calm and complete absorption in her own point of view heightens the tension of the narrative. The manner in which Browning is able to suggest the state of the lover's mind comments both on the nature of the action and the character of the protagonist. The controlled violence of both the lady in 'The Laboratory' and Cristina in the present poem, is noteworthy; the former takes sadistic pleasure in visualizing her rival's death-throes—'Let death be felt and the proof remain;/Brand, burn up, bite into its grace' (11.38-39); Cristina orders her hired assassins to kill her lover: 'You three, stab thick and fast,'
and deeper..." (ll.134-35). DeVane's assessment of "The Laboratory" as "an economical statement of an intricate and tense situation," may be regarded as pertinent to "Cristina and Monaldeschi" also.

In "Rosny" Browning uses the characteristically tragic situation of the ballad form to highlight the peculiar psychology of a woman who values honour more than love. The form of the ballad is an apt medium for the compression and suggestiveness that is the finest feature of Browning's narrative art,—the focusing of the action on a single episode and permitting it to interpret itself with a minimum of comment and descriptive setting. The impersonal manner of the narration, nevertheless, does not preclude the evocation of sympathy for the hero, while the judgement passed on the woman who regards "death and fame" as "love's guerdon" is encompassed in the response evoked by the single word "simpler", used with reference to her. The feelings portrayed in this poem have a complexity however, that go far beyond the elemental, unshaded passions of the traditional ballad.

"Muck-Mouth Meg" is a dramatization of a Scottish legend, written with Browning's typical zest and whole-hearted appreciation of a man who has the courage of his convictions and who opts for death rather than a loveless marriage. It has the simplicity and clarity of the traditional folk-tale.

Browning called "Beatrice Signorini" his best poem in the Asolando volume, and though we may question his choice, it is easy to see why Browning felt as he did. The poem embodies two of his most frequently recurring interests—his love of painting and his fondness for exploring the unsuspected facets of human personality, in this case, with reference to love. The love that he treats here is of two kinds: one that passes from mere physical attraction to a spiritual union, and the other kind, more earthy, more instinctive, but none the less potent. Romanelli is in the long line of Browning lovers whose pride in their beloved's perfection persists despite unfulfilment in love. In this poem Browning once again asserts the essential "rightness" of impulsive action. Beatrice, in whom her husband found "milk for blood" (echoing Guido's words for Pompilia) proves her passionate nature in a most unsuspected fashion and wins her husband's love "Past power to change" (1.351).
"The Bean-Feast" and "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" may be taken together as complementary poems illustrating two opposed ways of regarding Divine power. In the former, which is straightforward narrative, the Pope's humility in acknowledging himself as merely an instrument of God: "earth obeys/Thy word in mine, that through me people know thy ways" (11.41-42) and his grateful acceptance of God's beneficence: "Thy goodness nowise scants/Man's body of its comforts" (11.44-45) contrasts tellingly with the deification accorded to and accepted by the Emperor Augustus. A further contrast is presented by the Pope's joyous relationship with his God, and the Emperor's superstitious fear of "Fate's envy, the dread chance of things" (1.130).

In "Imperante Augusto Natus Est--" Browning's narrative art attains a high degree of sophistication. The pivotal feature of this poem is the consistently maintained tension between Caesar's assumed divinity and the reality of his being born of "flesh and blood" (1.81). Browning's use of the narrator to highlight this tension is paralleled by the corresponding tension within the narrator himself, who is torn by conflicting feelings embodied in the telling line: "where was escape from his prepotency?" (1.32). On the one hand, the narrator
is part of the society that raves "Be Caesar God!"; on the other, the stifling atmosphere of this mindless adulation leads him to seek relief—"Jove thus dethroned, I somehow wanted air" (1.23). The juxtaposition between the narrator's concept of Caesar as "Our Holy and Inviolable One" (1.100) and his almost unconscious thought of the prophecy of the grey Sibyl—"Caesar Augustus regnant, shall be born/In blind Judea—one to master him" (11.158-59), highlights the ambivalence within the man, as also his exclamation, "Crown, now-Cross, when?" (1.151). But the fear that these subversive thoughts arouse in the narrator is tellingly embodied in his query, "Him and the universe?" (1.160) and this, in turn, leads him to hastily "regain his equilibrium" (David Shaw's term) by dismissing the prophecy as "An old wife's tale?" (1.160). The question mark, once again expressing his mental conflicts, is very apt. The manner in which he turns furiously upon the bath drudge is not merely a "revealing disclosure of pagan pride" as Shaw puts it, it is also a masterpiece of psychological realism, for it shows him masking his inner fears by being violent. Like "An Epistle of Karshish"

the poem dramatizes a psychological conflict and the subtly held interplay of contrary ideas reveals a poet who even in his very last phase has not lost his skilful touch.