CHAPTER IV
THE SATIRIC MODE

In the poems examined in the previous chapter casuistry emerges from the gap between the ideal and the actual, and though Browning does not exculpate his casuists, he at least views them with sympathy. In many poems of the later period, however, the awareness of this gap leads Browning to a more forthright form of exposure, and one in which the balance is weighted more in favour of judgement, i.e. satire. This satire is all the more effective because it is supported in most cases by a narrative interest, and more trenchant (if somewhat less subtle) because it is direct, unlike the oblique satire of the earlier dramatic monologues.

Browning's political scepticism, earlier evinced in Sordello and the Plays finds expression in the later phase in Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, with its ironic view of political processes and of politicians who style themselves as saviours of society. Browning himself called the poem "a sort of political satire", exposing the workings of the mind of a politician when called upon to defend his course of action. In Aristophanes' Apology, the comic poet speaks of the demagogue whose folly he satirizes:

(Noisome air-bubble, buoyed up, borne along
By kindred breath of knave and fool below,
Whose hearts swell proudly as each puffing face
Grows big, reflected in that glassy ball,
Vacuity, just belled out to break
And righteously bespatter friends first,)
I loathing,...
The fawning, cozenage and calumny
Wherewith such favourite feeds the populace
That fan and set him flying for reward:

A more extended attack on political demagoguery is made
"Parleying with George Bubb Dodington" (Parleyings
with Certain People of Importance in Their Day, 1887).
This is the only parleying in which Browning extensively
uses the satirical method to show up the shortcomings of
a particular point of view. His intention is to expose
and condemn the time-serving behaviour of politicians.
Browning sets about ruthlessly tearing off the disguise
from time-honoured malpractices in politics and revealing
them in all their ugliness.

James Sutherland says: "The satirist is most
devastating when he appears most disengaged."² Browning
achieves this disengagement by a device unique in the
parleyings. He speaks, not in his own voice, but in the
cynical, man-of-the world voice of one who recognizes
charlatanry as an accepted principle in politics, and
is unconcerned about the end, but cares only for the

² James Sutherland, English Satire (Cambridge: The
means used, the question being what sort of means achieve the desired end of success. This device is reminiscent of Swift, for Swift also spoke often through a persona that he assumed for the occasion. By using an unreliable narrator to reveal the aberrations of a point of view, Browning's dialectical method becomes an instrument of satire. And his exposure is all the more hard-hitting because it is spoken by a narrator who accepts this state of things as a matter of course. By identifying with a morally unacceptable point of view, Browning's narrator unwittingly exposes to the reader its internal contradictions. The speaker's responses introduce ironies at the expense of the subject, which would not emerge had Browning chosen to speak directly in his own voice as in the other parleyings. As Roma A. King says: "By accepting Dodington's naturalistic premises and arguing the failure of his means rather than the evil of his ends, the speaker doubly exposes the inhumanity of a contemporary perspective against which Browning protested." The poem is thus complex, simultaneously presenting four different perspectives—the views on political action of Dodington, Disraeli, the speaker, and, by implication, Browning himself.

3. The Focusing Artifice, p.256.
The "Parleying with Dodington" opens on an easy, neutral, conversational note that sets the tone of the piece: it is cynically matter-of-fact. Once again, we are reminded of Swift, who uses a similar non-committal tone to make the most outrageous statements. The speaker's unquestioning acceptance of underhand practices in politics leads to an ironic gap between his viewpoint and the author's, which is never stated, but the reader is aware of the disparity. In "Clive" (Dramatic Idylls, Second Series), the obtuseness of the narrator was a foil to the sensitive character of the protagonist. Here, the narrator's obtuseness in sympathizing with and finding excuses for evil and wrong-doing serves to emphasize the enormity of the crimes he is condoning. His argument, that it is natural for a statesman to pretend that he is working for the common good even while he is concerned only for his "private welfare" (I) is doubly ironical in the light of his pious affirmation "Intends/Scripture aught else..."(I). He further reinforces his contention with an example from the world of nature—the bird who builds a nest with a rough outside, but "contrived himself/A snug interior, warm and soft and sleek"(I).

The ironies inherent in the situation are obvious. The speaker's advocacy of hypocritical attitudes, his
eagerness to assert his sympathies with Dodington when
the latter says: "What fool conjectures that profession
means/Performance?" (II) and again: "All outside show,
in short, is sham" (II), merely discredits these attitudes.
The speaker here reveals the kind of intellectual aberration
that we see in the speaker in "Tertium Quid" in The Ring
and the Book to whom men are little more than animals. In
both, the use of animal imagery with reference to man
reveals the extent of their dehumanization. To the speaker
in the parleying, men are

...a herd, whereof
No unit needs be taught, his neighbours trough
Scarce hold for who but grunts and whines the husks
Due to a wrinkled snout that shows sharp tusks. (IV)

Political manipulation comes in for satirical treatment
and the satire is all the more deadly for being put into
the mouth of a cynic: "Disinterested slaves, nay--please
the Fates--/Saviours, and nothing less:" and again:

O happy consummation!--brought about
By managing with skill the rabble rout
For which we labour (never mind the name--
People or populace, for praise or blame) (II)

4. Maisie Ward mentions an incident between Browning and
Disraeli: "In his speech he [Disraeli] had praised
'the imagination of the British School of art, but when
Browning later asked for his opinion, he said, 'What
strikes me is the utter and hopeless want of imagination'.
This led Browning to remark to Allingham: "What a humbug
he is! Won't I give it to him one of these days."' in
The speaker, as well as Dodington and Disraeli, stand condemned because they have blurred the distinction between black and white, committed the worst kind of sophistry which, as Balaustion puts it in Aristophanes' Apology 'Is when man's own soul plays its own self false/Reasons a vice into a virtue', (p.852).

Although these politicians recognize the sorry state of man, "Sloth-stifled genius, energy disgraced/By ignorance high aims with sorry skill,/Will without means and means in want of will" (IV), it is, for them, a spectacle to be exploited not redeemed. In their playing up of Man's baser nature, they have done an injustice to his soul. The sympathy which redeemed Browning's judgement of Napoleon is wholly lacking here. For Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau's ideals were real and laudable, even if they were not translated into action. Dodington and others like him lack any kind of ideals whatsoever, being the basest kind of human being, one who thinks of no one but himself. When Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau uses the words "save society", he is sincere if misguided. When the speaker in the "Parleying" uses the word "Saviour", he does so in a patently cynical fashion. His conclusion is that Dodington's methods have been a failure. Mere strength and intelligence are not
enough. Man must now manipulate the supernatural in order to create any impression of superiority. He unashamedly admits that it is this sort of quackery that "men quail/Before" (VI).

Set off against the poet of the preceding parleying, Christopher Smart and the painter of the succeeding one, Francis Furini, the politicians are exposed for the knaves that they are. In contrast to Smart, whose vision of the supernatural was "one blaze of truth/Undeadened by a lie" ('Parleying with Christopher Smart', VI), and who uses his powers to show men "by what degrees/Of strength and beauty to its end Design/Ever thus operates" (VII), these charlatans would use the supernatural for the sake of gratifying selfishness and greed. They stand condemned for their lack of reverence for the men whom they profess to serve: "No use/In men but to make sport for you, induce/The puppets now to dance, now to stand stock-still," (VII). How vivid is the contrast between these politicians and the artist Furini with his reverential attitude to man as a symbol of the Prime Mind.

Browning's attitude becomes more explicit if we think of earlier poems with political themes. In The Return of the Druses, Djabal exploits the super-natural
and proclaims himself a divinely sent Hakeem only in order to redeem his people. The interest in the welfare of the common people which Browning lauded in Valence in Colombe's Birthday and earlier in Sordello is totally lacking in Dodington and Disraeli. Browning is satirical about the men who would exploit man's baser nature, his ignorance and gullibility instead of contending with it. And what he invites us to ridicule is the whole process of specious rhetoric and false reasoning. The bland and persuasive arguments of the narrator may give rise to confusion in the mind of the reader were it not for the fact that Browning establishes him as an unreliable narrator at the very outset. His moral norms are shallow. What he (the speaker) admires is the deviousness of "exquisite disguise/Disguise abjuring, truth that looks like lies." (VII).

In Dodington and Disraeli, Browning presents the insidious distortions of excessive intellectualization that kills the common goodness in a man's heart. Placed between two men who value the imaginative and the intuitive, Dodington represents Browning's condemnation of the ratiocinative. In their absolute dependence on materialistic reason, the politicians have cut themselves off
from the sources of truth. Instead of dealing with truth, these men deal with delusion and falsehood. Their opportunism is more reprehensible than that of either Chiappino or Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau. The former is misguided, the latter is weak. Browning's delineation of the Prince shows his shortcomings, but is coloured by his feeling—"I think he struggles against these."

In Dogington, there is no struggle at all; the leaders are depicted as wallowing in their knavery. DeVane says of The Soul's Tragedy: "Chiappino is a lost leader, in truth, and Browning's faith in liberalism—at least in the virtue of its leaders—shows itself disillusioned almost to the point of cynicism. The taste one gets of politics and politicians in Luria, published with A Soul's Tragedy, is likewise unsavoury." This unsavouriness reaches its climax in Dodington, where the characters are entirely opposed to Browning's conception of heroes as "men and women who act in the light of ideal principles and honest convictions, scorning worldly consequences."

Institutionalism of all kinds, political, legal and above all religious, is Browning's particular target for satire. A major theme in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* is the satirical exposure of the 'none-excluding, all-collecting Church!' (p. 383). Browning's sympathy for the hero Miranda, whose emotional confusions have been aggravated not allayed by religion, leads to a bitter indictment of the Church for its failure to guide souls in need. One remembers a similar indictment in *The Ring and the Book*. There also the churchmen hold rigidly to the letter of their religion while neglecting its true spirit. In *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, the parish priest and the nun who hasten to counsel Miranda return with "'each palm well crossed with coin/And nothing like smutch perceptible'" (p. 410). Their rationalization of their covetous greed is highlighted: "'Monsieur Leonce Miranda might compound/For sin?—no surely! but by gifts—prepare/His soul the better for contrition, say!'" (p. 410). At the end of the poem the narrator offers his own assessments of the chief characters and his harshest estimate is reserved for the religious authorities:
...the couple yonder, Father Priest
And Mother Nun, who came and went and came,
Beset this Clairvaux, Trundled money-muck
To midden and main heap oft enough,
But never bade unshut from sheath the gauze,
Nor showed that, who would fly, must let fall filth,
And warn 'Your jewel, brother, is a blotch:
Sister, your lace trails ordure! Leave your sins,
And so best gift with Crown and grace with Robe!'

(p.423)

''Cenciaja'' (Pacchiarotto volume) is another instance of Browning's satire against the corrupt practices of the church prelates, who would make even innocence appear guilty if it suited their purposes. In The Ring and the Book we are shown how the Church has become a centre of wealth and power, attracting to its service men who are anything but religious in their attitudes and behaviour. The Pope is aware that clerical privilege is being used to protect crime. An incident of this nature is the theme of the present poem. Browning probes for the true motives behind the murder of Castanza Santa Croce by her son Paolo and the conviction of the elder son Onofrio, for alleged complicity in the crime. The Cardinal's zeal in hunting out the criminal, his lofty pronouncement, 'Who sins must die' (1.229), is seen in an ironical light, for his motives are of the basest kind. He promises the judge the 'Hat and Purple' if he would secure the conviction of the innocent Onofrio,
because he desired a woman who favoured Onofrio. Much of the satirical import of the poem resides in the asides uttered by the narrator, as when he begins with ''When Cardinal Aldobrandini (great/His efficacy—nephew to the Pope!')'' (ll. 119-20).

Following this poem which satirizes aberrations in religious feeling is one on religious intolerance. In ''Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial'' Browning uses the technique of the unreliable narrator, one whose point of view is clearly flawed, in order to heighten the effects of satire against a man narrow-minded enough to praise the ''honest zeal to stop the voice/Of unbelief with stone-throw'' (stanza III). As we see in the ''Parleying with Francis Furini'', Browning despised Baldinucci, calling him a blockhead, and ''scruple-splitting, sickly -sensitive/Mild-moral-monger''(II). Browning's conviction that religion is a matter of love in a man's heart rather than blind interpretations of traditional dogma, is embodied here in the ironical treatment meted out to Baldinucci's tale. Through the dramatization of a distorted point of view, the reader is made to perceive ironies of which the character himself is unaware. The poem's satiric intention emerges from
what Hintner calls "the grotesque of fragmentation," and distortion, which is mainly a matter of language which mirrors perverted religious feeling. The poem satirically portrays a man who has denied humane brotherliness in his concern for the superficial trappings of religion. This is reminiscent of Browning's satirical treatment of the monk in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" whose holy concepts have hardened into formalisms. The picture we get is of a man who has equated superstition with religion. The frequent use of animal imagery: "giving hogs a hoist" (IV), "just where sought these hounds to hide/Their carrion" (VIII), "Grey as a badger: with a goat's/Not only beard but bleat" (XII), "these dogs" (XXII) emphasizes the nature of the speaker himself as one devoid of humanity, for he equates men with brutes. Baldinucci's neglect of the essence of religion—tolerance and love—is exposed in the last lines:

> In Christ's crown, one more thorn we rue!  
> In Mary's bosom, one more sword!  
> No, boy, you must not pelt a Jew!  
> O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? (LVIII)

Satire against Roman Catholicism is the motive force of two narrative poems in the Asolando Volume, "The Cardinal and the Dog" and "The Pope and the Net".

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The former satirizes the superstitious atmosphere that surrounded the prelates. DeVane explains that "Cardinal Crescenzio was obnoxious to the Protestants because he would make no concessions", so that the story of how the cardinal sickened and died after he had a vision of a huge dog springing on him, may also concern the judgement visiting those who practise religious intolerance. In fact, this point of view is reinforced by the contrasted tolerance of the narrator towards the end of the poem: "Heaven keep us Protestants from harm: the rest...no ill betide" (l.15). The latter poem exposes the duplicity of another churchman, whose humility becomes a means to an end, and is then discarded once the end has been attained. The dramatic impact of the last line—"Why, Father, is the net removed?" "Son, it hath caught the fish" (l.24)—intensifies the satire.

Browning's satire against the legal profession in The Ring and the Book is too well-known to need elaboration. To the poet, lawyers represented that class of people who subordinated truth for personal gain."10 In "Ponte Dell'Angelo, Venice" (Asolando), Browning combines the themes

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10. See Browning's letter to Furnivall, February 12, 1888: 'I have always had a supreme contempt for the profession'. Letters, ed. Hood, p.287.
of religious superstition and legal corruption in the story of an extortionate lawyer who maintained an outward semblance of virtue, and who sought to foil Satan, who had been sent to convey him to 'punishment's place', by erecting a statue of an angel over his house.

Literary satire is also to be found in Browning's later poetry. Fifine at the Fair, as O.P. Govil as shown in his essay 'Satire in Browning's Fifine at the Fair', may be viewed as an extended satire against the Pre-Raphaelite conceptions of art, the satiric burden being borne mainly by the innumerable half-concealed allusions. Satire against literary quacks is the intention of The Two Poets of Croisic, in which Browning records the meteoric rise and tame downfall of two long-forgotten poets. The dominant tone is one of bland good-humour at the follies of petty rhymesters. Browning's gift for comic, satiric verse is very much in evidence here. His method of saying the most outrageously funny things in a tone of mock-solemnity is reminiscent of Dryden in Macflecknoe: 'A poet born and bred, his very sire/A poet also, author of a piece/Printed and published, 'Ladies--their attire' '(XXIX).

The satire here is good-natured; it is the good humour of a man who can afford to be generous to a fool. The eight-line stanza reminds us of Byron and echoes the same, off-hand contemptuous manner. In the story of the success of the second poet, Paul Desforges Maillard, a success which is based on deception, Browning satirizes the evaluators of literary works, whose judgements are motivated not by the intrinsic worth of the produced work but by extraneous, often irrelevant, considerations.

Satire against literary critics is a major theme in the poems of the Pacchiarotto volume, in which Browning attacks by means of ridicule not only a personal enemy (Alfred Austin), but the whole tribe of critics that Austin represents.

The personal fury that motivated the title poem of the volume "Of Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper" may be gauged from a letter that Browning wrote to Edmund Gosse on August 19, 1876:

One particular piece of blackguardism headed 'Men of Letters: R.B.'--could only save its author from a kicking by the charitable hope that he was too small for that treatment. I never was unlucky enough to set eyes on the man: if he is physically as well as morally and intellectually a dwarf--you may be sure I should have considered him a pygmy had his stature been that of Goliath. But I really meant nothing except to enliven my visionary dance of chimney-sweeps by a grotesque monkey-image which had been thrusting itself upon my
notice this long while: and it seems that one fillip more than avenges fifty flea-bites. The 'Examiner' may be sure, moreover, that Mr. Alfred Austin will take his own part in every rag of newspaper to which he has free access. What man of the ordinary size ever yet ducked down so low,—hooted from his hiding at what he presumed to call his 'fellows',—and then tried to stand on tiptoe by their side, as a 'poet' just as if nothing had happened? 12

In Aristophanes' Apology (1875), he had satirized Austin as the critic whom Euripides finds too insignificant even to acknowledge:

He reasoned, I'll engage,—'Acquaint the world Certain minuteness butted at my knee? Dogface Eruxis, the small satirist, What better would the mannikin desire Than to strut forth on tiptoe, notable As who so far up fouled me in the flank?'' So dealt he with the dwarfs:... (p.332)

In 'Of Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper', Browning treats in a lighter vein the sad fate that met the reforming zeal of Giacomo Pacchiarotto, a mediocre artist and petty dabbler in politics in fifteenth century Siena, and indirectly warns his critics, and especially Austin, who is intended to be a parallel to Pacchiarotto, of the consequences of their attempts at reforming him as a poet. Browning's object here is essentially the satirist's object of directing the reader away from sympathetic identification and moving him instead to amusement and contempt. His method is that of straightforward diminution that tears away the masks from pettiness and absurdity. Pacchiarotto's obtuse egotism

is highlighted by the ironical grandeur of his ambitions:

Man, devil as now he found him,
Would presently soar up angel
At the summons of such evangel,
And owe—what would Man not owe
To the painter Pacchiarotto?
Ay, look to thy laurels, Giotto!  (Section III)

This is almost like the mock-heroic method of linking
the trivial with the grand in order to emphasize the
insignificance of the former. The reader is invited
to ridicule the absurdity of his apparent rhetoric and
specious reasoning. The sheer comedy of Pacchiarotto's
oration to his painted frescoes, with all its accompaniment
of grotesque flourishes is nevertheless laced with the
satirical exposure of his 'hop, skip, jump' technique
of changing sides. Browning's method is to descend
abruptly from the insignificant to the ludicrous, thus
underscoring the fact that a pigmy was posturing as a
Goliath:

He, one by one, with asperity
Stripped bare all the cant-clothed abuses,
Disposed of sophistic excuses,
 Forced folly to abandon,
 And left vice with no leg to stand on.
So crushing the force he exerted,
That Man at his foot lay converted!

True—Man bred of paint-pot and mortar!  (X-XI)

The amused detachment masks Browning's sense of superiority
to a very foolish opponent; and behind the rollicking good
humour lies the concentrated force of Browning's contempt. In retaliation to what Austin had called, with reference to Browning, "the most astounding and ludicrous pretension", Browning creates a parallel character who really assumes ludicrous pretensions and comes to an extremely sorry end. Pacchiarotto receives his warning:

Lest haply thyself prove besotted
When stript, for thy pains, of that costume
Of sage, which has bred the imposthume
I prick to relieve thee—of,—Vanity! (XXII)

The latter half of the poem lays a great deal of emphasis on the poet's own good-natured acceptance of criticism and his straightforward manner of dealing with his critics in contrast to the peevish and mischievous destructiveness of the troop of critics themselves. At one point alone does Browning's equanimity desert him, and significantly it is connected with the critic's demand for "clearness of words which convey thought" (XXVIII). The obscurity of which Browning was regularly accused was a sore point with him even as early as his

love letters to Elizabeth. And in the present poem, this indignation expresses itself through the crushing intensity of invective:

Ay, if words never needed enswathe aught
But ignorance, impudence, envy
And malice—what word-swathe would then vie
With yours for a clearness crystalline?
But had you to put in one small line
Some thought big and bouncing—as noddle
Of goose, born to cackle and waddle
And bite at man's heel as goose-wont is,
Never felt plague its puny os frontis—
You'd know, as you hissed, spat and sputtered,
Clear cackle is easily uttered!

Reformers of all kinds, moral as well as literary, with their holier-than-thou attitudes are sharply satirized by Browning. In the "Parleying with Francis Furni" Browning launches a virulent attack against the prudishness of John Calcott Horseley who had spoken out against the nude in art:

14. Cf. letter of February 6, 1846, in which Browning defends himself against Miss Mitford's charge of his 'raying out darkness': 'Of course an artist's whole problem must be, as Carlyle wrote to me, 'the expressing with articulate clearness the thought in him'—I am almost inclined to say that clear expression should be his only work and care—for he is born, ordained, such as he is—and not born learned in putting what was born in him into words—what ever can be clearly spoken, ought to be; but 'bricks and mortar' is very easily said—and some of the thoughts in Sordello not so readily even if Miss Mitford were to try her hand on them—" Letters of RB and EBB, I, p.439.
Paints he? One bids the poor pretender take
His sorry self, a trouble and disgrace,
From out the sacred presence, void the place
Artists claim only. What—not merely awake
Our pity that suppressed concupiscence—
A satyr masked as a matron—makes pretence
To the coarse blue-fly's instinct—can perceive
No better reason why she should exist—
—God's lily-limbed and blushrose-bosomed Eve—
Than as a hot-bed for the sensualist
To fly-blow with his fancies, make pure stuff
Breed him back filth—this were not crime enough?

(III)

Such heights of fury and scorn are reached nowhere
else in Browning's satiric verse.

When Browning satirizes aberrations from a moral
norm he is almost always able to maintain a sense of
proportion in distinguishing the serious faults from
the trivial; but when that norm is a very personally
held belief, or when, as in the case of his satire
against his critics, his sense of fair-play is touched
to the quick, his scorn sometimes descends to invective.
Though his understanding of man's mortal nature leads
him to view with a certain sympathy his shortcomings,
his desire for the truth impells him to expose folly
when he sees it. Though sympathy is less evident in
the later satire, Browning's irony is never destructive.
In exposing the reality behind the mask, he really seems to be lamenting the failure of human nature to fulfil its ideals.

Browning's grudge against his critics is rooted in what he felt was their misrepresentation of his works and so he is often led, directly or indirectly, to present the aesthetic ideas that shaped his poetry. The following chapter examines this aspect of the later poetry.