

# BROWNING'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REASON AND PASSION PRESENTED IN "MY LAST DUCHESS"

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Browning's presentation of human nature in paradox between intellect and emotion is so intricate that as early as in 1891 Henry Jones attacked Browning as a complete agnostic and pessimist. Jones's severe indictment has been generally accepted as satisfactorily proved until as late as in 1964 Philip Drew refuted Jones's argument. Drew's contention for the poet is grounded on the principle that poetry and philosophy cannot be treated on the same level of argument, and he defended Browning with the argument that reason itself is based on an act of trust. It is noticeable to find Drew conclude his contention with the following remark:

Once we have realized the incompleteness and inaccuracy of his argument, the way is open for a reconsideration of those poems in which Browning offers such resolutions of the great paradoxes of human thought.<sup>1)</sup>

At the core of Browning's philosophical and speculative poems we find not an impulsive and emotional denial of man's intellectual responsibilities but we find a constant awareness of his intellectual limitations. This awareness forces Browning always into a position of questioning and doubting, but this does not mean for Browning a denial of the role of intellect.

While we can agree with Chesterton that it is true that Browning's processes of thought are not exactly scientific in their precision and analysis because he is a poet,<sup>2)</sup> we cannot agree with what Henry Jones says: "It was, thus, I conclude, a deep speculative error into which Browning fell,

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1) Philip Drew, "Henry Jones on Browning's Optimism," *The Browning Critics*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 380.

2) G. K. Chesterton, "Browning as a Literary Artist," *Ibid.*, p. 78.

when, in order to substantiate his optimistic faith, he stigmatized human knowledge as merely apparent."<sup>3)</sup> Browning always holds that human knowledge is a gift from God. He esteemed it as highly as its counterpart element in love. But there are some places in Browning's poetry where anti-intellectualism may be suspected. For instance, in "Parleying with Christopher Smart" he says that nature was given to man for two reasons: first, 'to be by man enjoyed'; and, second, to supply the means of instructions, which is "enjoyment's fruit":

Nature was made to be by Man enjoyed.  
 First; followed duly by enjoyment's fruit,  
 Instruction—haply leaving joy behind:  
 ...as you may  
 Master the heavens before you study earth,.....<sup>4)</sup>

Browning laments in some bitterness that modern man wants the secrets of heaven before mastering the lessons of earth. To him life is greater than any of its parts, including both the arts and sciences. Here Browning is following his argument that man is given sufficient insight into the strength and beauty of the world for comprehension of life's lesson.<sup>5)</sup>

But in such a fragmentary utterance as this Browning is only figuratively speaking, and it should not be taken as representing his overall opinion of the role of human intellect. In "Tray" Browning condemns the scientist who is "prerogated with reason," but he is not blaming the reason itself. He is reproaching him for his heartlessness.

Perhaps no more telling evidence in Browning's words of his respect for truth and for the mind's role in arriving at truth, even when such application of mind was in conflict with the great love of his life, can be supplied than that in a letter to Isa Blagden (September 19, 1867). He lists seven Greek letters and adds:

There! Those letters indicate seven distinct issues to which I came with Ba, in our profoundly different estimates of thing and person: I go over

3) Henry Jones, "The Heart and the Head," *op. cit.*, ed. Litzinger and Knickerbocker, p. 23.

4) "Parleyings with Christopher Smart," 11. 225-227, 11. 241-242.

5) Norton B. Crowell, *The Triple Soul: Browning's Theory of Knowledge* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1963), p. 107.

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them one by one, and must deliberately inevitably say, on each of these points I was, am proved to be, right and she wrong. And I am glad I maintained the truth on each of these points, did not say, "What matter whether they be true or no?—Let us only care to love each other."<sup>6</sup>

As if in refutation of those who maintain that Browning believed that pure and innocent natures see into the heart of truth instinctively, he adds:

If I could ever have such things out of my thoughts, it would not be today—the day, twenty years ago, that we left England together. If I ever seem too authoritative or disputative to you, dearest Isa, you must remember this, and that only to those I love very much do I feel at all inclined to lay down what I think to be the law, and speak the truth,—but no good comes of anything else, in the long run,—while, as for seeing the truth it seems to me such angelic natures don't—and such devilish ones do: it is no sign of the highest nature: on the contrary, I do believe the very highness blinds, and the lowness helps to see.<sup>7</sup>

Duffin insists that the two elements, reason and passion, in Browning's poetry are not blended into one, but are separate—especially in the earlier poems (before 1872). Browning, Duffin says, knows passion—otherwise he would be no poet; his mind is an atomicfurnace of thought: but the passion does not often go into the thought. Duffin then refers to "Amphibian," the Prologue for "Fifine at the Fair," as an example of the case.<sup>8</sup>

Browning does not deny the role of intellect. He only realizes his limitations in intellectual powers. Because of these limitations Browning finds himself in a situation where he must choose between hope and despair. It is in this difficult situation that Browning tried to solve the problem of good and evil by unifying the effects of intellect and emotion. Any argument about the reason and passion in Browning's poetry cannot be carried on without properly referring to Browning's metaphysical speculations on the problem of good and evil—the argument broadly termed as theodicy.

The argument of good and evil in Browning's poetry is not a simple optimism, accompanied by a deliberate smothering of the reason lest it

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6) Thurman L. Hood (ed.), *Letters of Robert Browning* (London: John Murray, 1933), pp. 128–129.

7) *Ibid.*

8) Henry Charles Duffin, *Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956), p. 48.

should inconveniently draw attention to certain deficiencies of the Creation. On the contrary, its origin is very often in a mood of anxiety and distress caused perhaps by the death of someone near to him, or by a sudden realization of the problems of pain or evil. Browning reacted to them not by listless acquiescence, but by an energetic attempt to establish, from his life's total experience in unifying the two elements of reason and passion, a picture of the world in which for himself personally there is still room, if not for certainty, at least for hope.

Browning's reconciling concept of good and evil, the basis of his optimistic philosophy of life, is so strange to Duffin that he cannot understand it: He says:

No one can read Browning and suppose that he underestimated the evil element in human nature. But what impressed him more was the wonder of simple goodness. He even felt that evil was somehow necessary to good—that evil and good were not so much antithetical as complementary, each requisite for completion. This seems to me an evasion, and it perhaps belongs only to his later years. There is a similar change in his view of sin.<sup>9)</sup>

In an argument on Browning's concept of good and evil a most unjustifiable assumption is that because Browning found evil and ignorance and doubt essential in life, he therefore justified illimitable evil, ignorance and doubt result when man scorns God's gifts, reason and passion, and violates God's purpose.<sup>10)</sup>

An interesting parallel to Browning's metaphysical teaching about love as the highest truth of life is found in Hegelian dialectic of love as the reconciling principle of reason and passion.<sup>11)</sup> It is important to know about Hegel's method that pervades Browning's reasoning. Hegelian method depends on recognizing that when we think anything, we implicitly think what it is not; and when we think a definite quality, we implicitly think its opposite—namely, beauty and ugliness, praise and blame, cruelty and politeness, courage and cowardice, faith and doubt, real and ideal,

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9) *Ibid.*, p. 42.

10) Crowell, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

11) W. Ralph Inge, "The Mysticism of Robert Browning," *Studies of English Mystics* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906), p. 288.

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knowledge and ignorance, good and evil, hope and despair, etc. Thus affirmation involves negation, and identity involves difference.

In the perfect life reason and passion will be swallowed up in a higher reality, and love will reveal itself as the only thing in the universe. The distinction between reason and passion can have no place in the absolute perfection. Reason and passion both postulate an ideal which they can never reach while they remain reason and passion. The element of Not-Self is essential to both, but is compatible with their perfection. But in the case of love this contradiction is overcome.<sup>12)</sup> The chief difference between Hegel's and Browning's teaching is that the latter attributes only a subordinate place to reason and to knowledge. Hegel finds a principle and a method of applying it wherewith he interprets the universe; the poet does not set himself directly to interpret the universe, but to interpret human souls, yet inasmuch as they are part and parcel of the whole, and must be studied by the light of the whole in which they are set, their interpretation equally involves a theory of the universe.

Browning's homage to love is based on reason. Knowledge and love are two forms of experience; and experience is the ultimate metaphysical reality. Far from believing that human nature is a duality of reason and passion, sundered by an illimitable gulf, Browning insisted on the unity of these two elements of reason and passion. If we judge the things as good or evil by either our reason or passion alone we will find the result of our judgment apparently true on the surface but deep in its nature contradictory. If we judge by unified power of reason and passion we will find the result of our judgment apparently contradictory, but the contradiction is only paradoxical, the essence of which is to be found as truth.

It is the prominent characteristic of Browning that he realizes the defect and falseness of onesidedness, and never halts at half-truths; he always gives them their proper place in relation to each other and a higher unity. The paradox of reason and passion presented in such poems as "My Last Duchess," "The statue and the Bust," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "A Death in the Desert," *The Ring and the Book*, and "Ivàn

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12) Friedrich Hegel, *On Christianity*, trans. by T. M. Knox (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), pp. 302-308.

Ivànovitch," is significant of Browning's philosophy of life.

"My Last Duchess" is one of Browning's treatments of human nature in the light of the paradox of reason and passion. The exquisite character portrayal of the Duke of Ferrara has been accomplished by Browning's penetrating insight into man's paradoxical nature made manifest by his observation of the conflict between extrinsic and intrinsic values of human life. The extrinsic value here is represented by the Duke in his egregious possessiveness of the *objet d'arte* and the intrinsic value is represented by the Duchess through the virtue of her innocent goodness.

"My Last Duchess" is considered one of the best of the possible examples of the dramatic monologue because of its unsurpassed effects of character revelation. The Duke is a complex individual; and Browning's monologue is a complex characterization. The Duke is compounded of egoism and astuteness, cruelty and politeness, pride of possession and love of art, all at once.<sup>13)</sup> The effect is produced by a kind of dramatic irony, by which the speaker reveals himself as infinitely better or worse than he supposes himself to be.

When the Duke attempts to give an unfavorable portrait of his last Duchess, he also gives us an exact likeness of himself. "My Last Duchess," then, is a clever character study of a Renaissance nobleman who does not appear to be so clever after all; some critics, like Jerman for instance, would have him "witless." This monologue is done with the same extraordinary irony as is exhibited in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" where the petty and lecherous monk unwittingly unmasks himself. Just as jealousy blinds the monk, vanity and pride blind the Duke. His Grace is so pleased with himself that he does not realize that he has given himself away.<sup>14)</sup> The excellence of "My Last Duchess" does indeed lie in a double use of dramatic irony; for the Duke, while revealing himself as infinitely worse than he supposes himself to be (in human worth, not wit), is at the same time revealing his last Duchess as infinitely better than he supposed her to be. The Duke is trying to build up himself and run down his

13) Laurence Perrine, "Browning's Shrewd Duke," *op. cit.*, ed. Litzinger and Knickerbocker, p. 340.

14) B. R. Jerman, "Browning's Witless Duke," *op. cit.*, ed. Litzinger and Knickerbocker, p. 335.

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Duchess, but for the reader (not necessarily for the envoy), he accomplishes just the reverse.<sup>15)</sup>

The Duke is an art collector, a splendid dilettante who prides himself on his possessions. As the poem opens, he is in his sublime role of collector, pointing out his various acquisitions to his visitor. He is proud of his possessions, particularly of the painting of his last Duchess, and is also proud of his knowledge of art. The Duke tells the envoy that his late Duchess was flirtatious, plebeian in her enthusiasm, and not sufficiently careful to please her husband; but the evident truth is that he had the aristocratic pride of his "nine hundred years old name." His pride is shown in the fact that although her expansive nature displeased him, he would never stoop to remonstrate with her.<sup>16)</sup>

His pride also shows itself evidently in the two declarations in his statement: (1) his pretense for dowry will be a just one, and (2) his chief desire is for the lady herself. But the Duke must have considered such naked declarations beneath his dignity, a kind of "stooping." In spite of his insistence that he is interested in the daughter's "self" and not her dowry, money is probably important to him. He avoids stooping to the naked declaration of bargaining by using an occasional form of expression, nevertheless he must make himself understood and at the same time he must preserve his pride. The ironic point is that in the very process of gratifying the pride, and at the very moment when he is explicitly declaring that he chooses never to stoop, he is implicitly stooping to reveal a domestic frustration.

The Duke values his wife's portrait wholly as a picture by a great artist, not as the reminder of a sweet and lovely woman, who might have blessed his life, if he had been capable of being blessed. The Duke's "design" is to exhibit his possessions, to pose as a patron of the arts, and to explain how he suffered to get the Duchess on canvas—all for the single purpose of directing attention to himself. In person, she was a nuisance because he could not possess her; framed she was the object of inquiries

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15) Perrine, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

16) William Lyon Phelps, *Robert Browning* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1932), p. 173.

which appealed to his vanity, hence, she was kept in his art gallery along with other presumed "rarities." Jerman thinks that the Duke explains "how such a glance came there" not because he feels compelled to make an accounting of his motives for getting rid of his last Duchess, thereby drawing a moral, but to state the "price" he had to pay for the portrait.<sup>17</sup> A man as proud as His Grace would not condescend to explain why he had her put away. But what he perhaps does not realize is that the painting has made him to reveal a domestic frustration because the revelation enables him to demonstrate his knowledge of art. The point of his knowledge of art is that art has been able to tame a meaningless smile into a significant "earnest glance." He disparages her personality, but praises her portrait as being a "wonder," because he now realizes that the painting has done what he himself could not do. This is the paradox.

The Duke's characterization of his last Duchess is a logically necessary argument for the proof of his theory: if the painting is striking in the "depth and passion of its earnest glance," it must be shown that the original was inferior to the painting.

...She had  
 A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad.  
 Too easily impressed: she liked whate'er  
 She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
 Sir, 't was all one! My favor at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
 Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good!  
     but thanked  
 Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
 My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
 With anybody's gift.....<sup>18</sup>

It is this theory of art entertained by the Duke that sets Browning to thinking about the paradoxical elements of the human estimate of the worth of life and arts—elements which Browning observes in the character

17) Jerman, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

18) "My Last Duchess," 11. 21-34.

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of the Duke. The Duke's paradoxical nature is fully revealed when, having boasted how at his command the Duchess's life was extinguished, he turns back to the portrait to admire of all things its lifelikeness.

... There she stands  
As if alive.....<sup>19)</sup>

Another paradoxical angle is that the Duke is trying to emphasize that the "wonder" masterpiece was done by a nameless dauber in a day or two without the Beatrice-Dante like inspiration to genius. It is "strangers," people who did not know the Duke and his last Duchess, who react as if they suspect some genius or passionate inspiration lies behind the painting; and so the Duke has taken the trouble to deny this at the outset. The logical assumptions we can make so far, then, are: first, that the "depth and passion" of the painting's "earnest glance" is the fascinating feature of the painting; second, that a stranger's reaction to it always includes the erroneous suspicion that the look was produced by virtue of passion, inspiration, or genius, or some combination of these; and third, that the Duke and (perhaps) non-strangers are fascinated by the painting for some other reason, identified only as the painting's lifelike quality but seemingly something more than this because of the Duke's unusual regard for it as a "wonder." This third assumption is the point of the Duke's theory of arts with which Browning takes issue.<sup>20)</sup>

The Duke reveals the cause of the "wonder" in that mysterious "earnest glance":

...Sir, 't was not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps  
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy.....<sup>21)</sup>

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19) 11. 46-47.

20) For this reading I am indebted to Thomas J. Assad, "My Last Duchess," *Tulane Studies in English*, X (1960), pp. 120-121.

21) 11. 13-21.

That which is represented in the painting as an "earnest glance" full of "depth and passion" was in the real Duchess only a "spot of joy" called into being by no special occasion—such as her husband's presence—but perhaps by some chance compliment paid to her by the painter. It is valuable not as the work of some especially gifted artist but because it demonstrates the "wonder" of art. The Duke has given his lesson in art appreciation and has illustrated the theory that the magic of art lies precisely in this: that by mere selection, isolation, and direct transference the artist can make striking and significant what in real life was considered commonplace and meaningless. The Duke has made a point in art appreciation. In its simplest form, that point is that art is a life better than life. To prove this theory it is shown by the Duke in his characterization of his last Duchess that the original was inferior to the painting. It would seem then that the Duke has made his point about art, has demonstrated that in its own way art is a life better than life.

The theme of the poem, then, would certainly be that art is a life better than life and this would account for Browning's supercilious attitude toward his Duke. It would also cause this poem in a role more diametrically opposed to its original companion piece, "Count Gismond," which obviously extols the truth of love and life.

To the Duke the portrait is a masterpiece. However, in deflating the real-life Duchess, and in inflating himself before the emissary, the Duke reveals that all the artist had to do was to paint what was on the surface, for she was shallow, indiscriminating, common. What appears at first glance to be a masterpiece, then, is a mechanically reproduced, realistic picture of a photogenic woman, a dilettante's trophy.<sup>22)</sup>

The Duchess' shallowness and indiscrimination emphasize the theory that art is better than life. But Browning is the last of poets to claim that art is a life better than life or that art is an adequate substitute for life.<sup>23)</sup>

22) Jerman, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

23) The argument of Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" has some of this theory inherent in it: "We're made so that we love/First when we see them painted, things we have passed/Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see; And so they are better, painted-better to us,/Which is the same thing. Art was given for that"...But we must be reminded that Constance says in

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Any attempt to clarify Browning's position in presenting the Duke as a lover of art naturally leads to the question of art in its relationship with ethics. In reading this poem we allow the Duke to have his way with us: we subordinate all other considerations to the business of understanding him. He grows in strength of character, and in the arrogance and poise which enable him to continue in command of the situation after his confession of murder has threatened to turn it against him. This willingness of the reader to understand the Duke, in spite of our moral judgment and our actual feeling against him, even to sympathize with him as a necessary condition of reading the poem, is the key to the poem's form—it being characteristically the style of the dramatic monologue to present its material empirically, as a fact existing before and apart from moral judgment which remains always secondary and problematical. In interpreting the moral judgment of this poem we are reminded of Browning's statement that he wants his readers to do their own interpreting, once even going so far as to tell an acquaintance that poetry was not a substitute for a cigar, or a game of dominoes to an idle man.<sup>24</sup> It would appear, as the story of the poem stands, that Browning is presenting the Duke as typical of the Renaissance character, to show the paradox of reason and passion with respect to the role of art in the ethics of human life.

This poem, first entitled "Italy," is said to catch the temper of the Italian Renaissance. In 1849 the somewhat meretricious connection between this poem and "Count Gismond" (France) was broken. It is evident, however, that Browning meant in 1842 to catch the tempers of the two countries (national psychologies interested him greatly) as well as to exhibit the nature of the marriage bond—in Italy, the wife is a chattel; in France, an adored mistress.<sup>25</sup> In the character of the Duke, Browning makes his first brilliant study of the culture and morality of the Italian Renaissance, a study which reached its apex in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb."

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"In a Balcony": "In the hall, six steps from us,/One sees the twenty pictures: there's a life/Better than life, and yet no life at all."

24) Hood, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.

25) W. D. DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (New York: F. S. Croft & Co., 1935), p. 98.

The Italian Renaissance setting of "My Last Duchess" helps us to suspend moral judgment of the Duke, since we partly at least take an historical view; we accept the combination of villainy with taste and manners as a phenomenon of the Renaissance and of the old aristocratic order generally. If we read the story of the poem under the historical view, we recognize such arrangements were probably common enough in those days of marriage of convenience. Yet, the poem is not merely an examination of the social situation. It is also a serious moral study of social motivation.

In "My Last Duchess" the speaker is a soulless virtuoso—a natural product of a proud, arrogant, and exclusive aristocracy, on the one hand; and on the other, of an old and effete city, like Ferrara, where art, rather than ministering to soul-life and true manliness of character, has become an end to itself—is valued for its own sake. The Duke has all the power of a Machiavellian prince; he has the knowledge of a man of culture, a patron of the arts, literature, sculpture, and painting. But Browning shows that these qualities are not redeemed by the leaven of love. The Duke's attitude toward art is a selfish delight in mere possession. From his attitude toward his paintings we know that is also his attitude toward life. He wishes to possess the next Duchess as a work of art in his already extensive collection. Mere possession rather than aesthetic enjoyment ministers to the Duke's pride which emerges even through the shell of his coldly formal courtesy. The individual who should be redeemed has lost his life-giving link with the source of life. Time for the Duke is a succession of possessed fragmentations, not a moment of visionary unity in which he can see his life in terms of art, or his art in terms of life.

It is the same Renaissance spirit that informs "My Last Duchess" and "The Bishop Orders his Tomb." The Duke and the Bishop are poured from the same mould; both have the same morality (or lack of it); the Bishop's learning is somewhat more pedantic; both delight in the possession of material goods as objects of personal pride and means of personal immortality. Both are seen in critical life-moments, the one as he contracts to acquire a new Duchess, the other at the point of death.

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In the moment the whole expanse of each life is seen, the delights, vanities, and characteristics. Neither Duke nor Bishop is able to face the point of time, the critical moment in each life by wedding love to power and knowledge. A Renaissance ecclesiastic orders his tomb, and a Renaissance prince orders his wife, but these are not meant by Browning to be studies in the nature of sacred and profane love. They are instead partial examinations of the partially grotesque. The grotesque in Browning has frequently been noted, but it is not generally observed that the grotesque is caused by a defect in respect to love.<sup>26)</sup>

The difficult problem of assessing the role of aesthetics in the scheme of life was a pervasive one throughout the Victorian era. From Tennyson's equivocal responses to Trench's famous and practical reminder that we cannot live in art came a whole searching corpus of poetry dealing with the aesthetic problem. It seems not presumptuous then to assume that Browning may have concerned himself with the same problem. He seems to have done so in "My Last Duchess," dating from the same year that Tennyson published his reworked version of "The Palace of Art" (1842). At one level the poem is an exploration of what aestheticism may or, more correctly, may not offer as a testament of life.<sup>27)</sup>

The last Duchess of the proud Duke in Ferrara is Browning's most famous innocent. We can know little about the poor Duchess, of course, except by reflection from the personality of the Duke. Her naive acceptance of the obvious flattery of Frà Pandolf is hardly to be construed as a revelation of the poverty of her intellect. Like another Duchess in Browning, also an innocent, she doubtless felt a kinship with creation in its divine plan. Our reactions to the Duchess are controlled by the warmth of her response to compliments, by her graciousness to inferiors, and especially by the things she takes delight in: the beauty of a sunset, the gift of a bough of cherries, a ride round the terrace on a white mule. Her response to these things indicates a genuine and sensitive nature, which takes joy in simple, natural things rather than in gauds and baubles or

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26) W. Whitla, *The Central Truth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 57.

27) Robert Stevens, "Aestheticism in Browning's Early Renaissance Monologues," *Victorian Poetry*, III, No. 1 (1965), p. 19.

the pomp of position and power which attract the Duke.<sup>28)</sup> "The Boy and the Angel" illustrates God's love of the simple, natural "little human praise." Brother Lawrence in the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is one of Browning's most engaging innocents. It is impossible to speculate with profit upon the uses and development of his mind, other than to observe that his sweet simplicity is striking evidence of the wholeness of his soul. It is to strain the sense of the lines to find that either Brother Lawrence or the Duke's last Duchess properly illustrate the principle that to be good one must be ignorant or simple.

The Duke's undeniable gifts as host and art collector are so great as to secure our momentary identification with him.<sup>29)</sup> But the identification must be only temporary, of course, for in our final assessment we know that the Duke is an irretrievably lost soul. His love of art is estimable; but it is not adequate—not adequate to compensate for his insufficiencies as a man. Art for its own sake, suggests Browning, is not enough to redeem a human spirit otherwise deficient. It can neither soften the temper nor justify the excesses of those who have no other inward resources.<sup>30)</sup> Corson explains:

Those who take an intellectual attitude toward all things...suppose that they are prepared to understand almost anything which is understandable if it is only put right. This is a most egregious mistake, especially in respect to the subtle and complex spiritual experience, which the more deeply subjective poetry embodies.....DeQuincey says. . . "No complex or very important truth was ever yet transferred in full development from one mind to another: truth of that character is not a piece of furniture to be shifted; it is a seed which must be sown, and pass through the several stages of growth. No doctrine of importance can be transferred in a matured shape into any man's understanding from without: it must arise by an act of genesis within the understanding itself." And so it may be said in regard to the responsiveness to the higher spiritual truths.....Spiritual truths must be spiritually responded to; they are not and cannot be intellectually comprehended.<sup>31)</sup>

28) Perrine, *op. cit.*, pp. 341-342.

29) Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York: Norton & Co., pp. 82-83.

30) Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

31) Hiram Corson, *Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1901), pp. 84-85.

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The intellectual sympathy that allows Browning to understand a point of view so different from his own also allows him to uncover its internal contradictions. In many of his poems (e.g. "Cleon") Browning shows that inordinate egotism and intellect frequently cohabit. The Duke's treatment of his listener is strikingly rhetorical; but he only gives evidence of what Burke would call a "pantomimic" morality always on the alert for slight advantages.<sup>32)</sup> Even his self-abasement before his visitor is a form of self-exaltation, the first strategem of pride.

The unpleasant fact in the person of the Duke still remains to be noticed. The wickedness of this man is not a wickedness of ignorance. It is a wickedness of highly cultivated intelligence. He is an artist, a judge of beauty, a connoisseur. To suppose that cultivation makes a naturally wicked man better is a great educational mistake, as Herbert Spencer showed long ago.<sup>33)</sup> Education does not make a man more moral; it may give him power to be more immoral. This is the basis of the view of the paradoxical nature of humanity in reason and passion as exemplified in the character of the Duke. When inward resources are absent, no ministering power from without can avail. Art cannot inspire the lost soul. Browning is thus ready to move on to an explicitly symbolic, and perhaps implicitly mystic notion of art.

In concluding this article, Browning's argument for the unity of reason and passion should be summarized. The arguments Browning carries on through the mouths of his characters often represent the moral truth as something too subtle, too complex, and too changing to be definitely expressed. These complexities in presenting the moral truth come from Browning's belief that no language is specific enough to convey the truth, since it is largely a matter of personal impression made by the complex fusion of reason and passion for each man.

Reason and passion are elements of every real fact of experience. Although one of these may be present in apparently much larger proportion,

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32) W. D. Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 103.

33) Lafcadio Hearn, *Appreciations of Poetry* (London: William Heinemann, 1916), p. 186.

yet the other also must be there in some measure, for both are essential elements of reality, and mutually imply one another. This consideration has brought Browning to most important results in psychological analysis. It is the inharmonious unity of these elements that puts souls out of the way. Excess of reason accompanied by defect of passion, and excess of passion accompanied by defect of reason, are equally disastrous. The Duke in "My Last Duchess" failed through holding to these opposite abstractions.

With slight variation of the point of view, reason is passion's recognition of itself; but if the human soul does not recognize passion in its object, but calls it merely truth or fact, then it does not "know" in the highest sense of the word, it has only a half-truth; and half-truths, beside being defective, are false because taken to be whole truths. Perfect passion would be also perfect reason, and perfect reason perfect passion. Despite the apparent contradiction between the testimonies of the reason and passion, Browning demonstrates the unity of these two elements blended by the loving purpose of God. Elizabeth Barrett categorizes his poetic vision in terms of the dualism: "You have in your vision two worlds, or to use the language of the schools of the day, you are both subjective and objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal with abstract thought and with human passion in the most passionate sense."<sup>34</sup> But of the two, passion in the highest sense is the prior and the superior. What man knows can every one know. But his heart is his alone. Man's problem is to harmonize reason and passion, which he can do but incompletely until by the process of evolution he has become as God.

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34) *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett 1845-1846.* (New York: 1899), p. 8, a letter dated January 15, 1845.