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Robert Browning: Separating Author from Narrator

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Abstract

In 1833, John Stuart Mill criticized Browning's very first poem, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession*, because he claimed that it overexposed the author. What Mill meant by this was that he thought Browning was self-obsessed and depressed. This criticism affected Browning's writings throughout the middle of his career by provoking him to formulate dramatic monologues in an attempt to distance himself from the narrators he created. But even though Browning was careful not to overexpose himself, his self-consciousness still made its way through to the reader. Browning exposes himself through his narrators in "My Last Duchess," "Porphyria's Lover," and "Andrea del Sarto." In each of these works, Browning shows growing comfort with writing in a more personal voice and exposing his social views. By 1887, when *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* was published, Browning had come to terms with Mill's criticism. The fictional conversations in this work allowed Browning to write from his own personal perspective and include his philosophies on life and writing.

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Robert Browning: Separating Author from Narrator

A Thesis in English

by

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Robert Browning: Separating Author from Narrator

Chapter 1: How *Pauline* and Other Early Writings Influenced Browning's Self-presentation

In 1833, John Stuart Mill criticized Browning's very first poem, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession*, because he claimed that it exposed the author's "intense and morbid self-consciousness" (qtd. in Starzyk 16). What Mill meant by this was that he thought Browning was self-obsessed and depressed. This criticism affected Browning's writings throughout the middle of his career by provoking him to formulate dramatic monologues in an attempt to distance himself from his writing. Browning's early writing was heavily influenced by Percy Bysshe Shelley, but by the time he wrote *Pauline*, he was striving to become his own poet. Mill's negative criticism made Browning face the fear that he might never be able to reach a great poet's level of success. This anxiety led Browning to try to distance himself from his poetry, but his "intense and morbid self-consciousness" still made its way through to the reader.

Before delving into Browning's works, it is important to consider Browning's thirst for literature as young teenager, because it is this thirst that shaped Browning's life. He longed to be a great poet and he patterned his early writing after Percy Bysshe Shelley. He grew up in a home with an immense library, which became his "greatest source of knowledge" (Sprague 3). As a young adolescent, Browning's idol was Shelley, and it is this homage to Shelley that figures in his early poem, *Pauline*. Shelley died at the young age of 29, and

Browning might have taken it upon himself to complete Shelley's "incomplete" career, thus the Shelleyan influence throughout Browning's early works. This might not be accurate, however, because in his *Essay on Shelley*, Browning ponders if Shelley's writing career was incomplete. He does say that, when studying a poet's writing, one should consult his biography and consider if the poet "[knew] more than he spoke of" (48). He comes to the conclusion that Shelley's work, written over a time of only ten years, includes a lifetime of knowledge. In the end of his essay, Browning writes: "It was the dream of my boyhood to render to his fame and memory" (73). *Pauline* appears to be a testament to the greatness of Shelley.

Throughout his first poem, *Pauline*, Browning recognizes Shelley as the foundation of his writing and refers to him as the "Sun-treader." At the time of writing *Pauline*, Browning was twenty years old and he had already outgrown his childhood love for the poet, but he pays homage to Shelley for his profound influence on his life in *Pauline*:

Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever!
 Thou art gone from us; years go by and spring
 Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,
 Yet thy songs come not, other bards arise,
 But none like thee: they stand, thy majesties,
 Like mighty works which tell some spirit there
 Hath sat regardless of neglect and scorn,
 'Till, its long task completed, it hath risen
 And left us, never to return, and all
 Rush in to peer and praise when all in vain
 The air seems bright with thy past presence yet,
 But thou art still for me as thou hast been
 When I have stood with thee as on a throne. (151-163)

Browning recalls his past love for Shelley. He comments that many poets have come and gone, but none have been as influential to him as Shelley was. *Pauline* is a poem of devotion to Shelley, but it is also a statement from Browning that he desires to become his own poet apart from Shelley, leading to an inner conflict. A short way into the poem, the narrator tells Pauline of a dream:

...I was a young witch whose blue eyes
 As she stood naked by the river springs,
 Drew down a god: I watched his radiant form
 Growing less radiant, and it gladdened me;
 Till one morn, as he sat in the sunshine
 Upon my knees, singing to me of heaven,
 He turned to look at me, ere I could lose
 The grin with which I viewed his perishing:
 And he shrieked and departed and sat long
 By his deserted throne, but sunk at last
 Murmuring, as I kissed his lips and curled
 Around him, "I am still a god—to thee." (112-133)

In the dream, the narrator describes himself as a witch conjuring Shelley as a "radiant" god. But his form starts to appear "less radiant." Upon reading this line, it seems as if Browning is beginning to distance himself from Shelley. He wants to separate himself from Shelley so he can pave his own future as a poet. But there is still a piece of him that wants to keep Shelley sacred:

I aim not even to catch a tone
 Of harmonies he called profusely up;
 So, one gleam still remains, although the last.
 Remember me who praise thee e'en with tears,
 For never more shall I walk calm with thee;
 Thy sweet imaginings are as an air,
 A melody some wondrous singer sings,
 Which, though it haunt men oft in the still eve,
 They dream not to essay... (216-225)

It seems like there is an inner battle brewing within Browning. He wants to be as great as Shelley is, but at the same time, he knows that he cannot come close to

imitating his art. This same “deep anxiety” of striving to be great, as Harold Bloom calls it, is also reflected in *Andrea del Sarto*, one of the dramatic monologues that will be studied in chapter two (*Genius* 760). It is this opposition which is at the heart of *Pauline*. He loves Shelley, and he is unwilling—at this time in the poem—to fully withdraw himself from that love. But can he fully withdraw himself? In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom so succinctly, yet so brilliantly, writes, “...only a poet makes a poet” (19). Browning's poetry would not exist if it was not for Shelley. Bloom continues, “The voice of the other...is always speaking in one; the voice that cannot die because already it has survived death—the *dead poet lives in one*” (19). In this sense, it is quite impossible for Browning to fully separate himself from Shelley. As long as Browning lives, a piece of Shelley lives within him, and this is the cause of Browning's anxiety.

In 1851, Browning published his *Essay on Shelley* as an introduction to a collection of Shelley's letters. Browning wrote very little prose criticism in his life, which is why this essay is especially important. It actually turns out that the letters about Shelley which Browning based this essay upon were fraudulent documents, but that is not important. In the essay, Browning writes about how Shelley was an important poet—even near the level of Shakespeare—because he was both a subjective and objective poet. Browning defines a subjective poet as one who writes “not what man sees but what God sees” (38), and an objective poet as one who “reproduces things external” (33). Browning respected and understood Shelley in such a way as to say he was each of these types of poets at the same time—something nearly impossible. The important point of the essay

is what Browning mentions about understanding the biography of a poet. He writes, “Doubtless, with respect to such a poet, we covet his biography. We desire to look back upon the process of gathering together in a lifetime, the materials of the work we behold entire” (36). Browning might have said this only because it would be important to know the biography of a poet that lived a short life, like Shelley. But Browning’s ultimate point was one that he lived by himself:

The man passes, the work remains. The work speaks for itself, as we say: and the biography of the worker is no more necessary to an understanding or enjoyment of it, than is a model or anatomy of some tropical tree, to the right tasting of the fruit we are familiar with on the market stall...” (37)

Philip Drew says it best when he writes, “The biography of such a man is not without interest, but we can do without it” (2). That is exactly what Browning was thinking. It is interesting, however, that Browning lost respect for Shelley after having learned of Shelley’s private life, but that will be discussed later. Browning was an intensely private person, and that is probably why he had strong feelings toward this subject. But it is very important to understand Browning’s thoughts on the unimportance of a writer’s biography to an understanding of his writings. I argue that it is of ardent importance that one knows Browning’s biography because it provides a much fuller understanding of his writing.

As mentioned earlier, Browning references Shelley in *Pauline* as “Sun-treader,” as if Shelley is a god in the heavens. Browning’s finest reference to Shelley appears written in a thankful stanza at the end of *Pauline*:

Sun-treader, I believe in God and truth
And love; and as one just escaped from death
Would bind himself in bands of friends to feel
He lives indeed, so, I would lean on them!

Thou must be ever with me, most in gloom
 If such must come, but chiefly when I die,
 For I seem, dying, as one going in the dark
 To fight a giant: but live thou forever,
 And be to all what thou hast been to me! (1020-1028)

Seeing all the evidence, Shelley certainly had an influence on Browning. He wishes that Shelley would “be ever with me” and he even wishes that Shelley’s words would “live forever.” But as Browning matured, his writing style changed and became his own. There are a few ideas as to why he strayed away from his boyish obsession with Shelley. First, Browning did not believe (like Shelley did) that humans had the ability to attain perfection. Browning believed that “universal perfection was only to be achieved by divine intervention” (Keenan 121). It was Shelley’s lofty ideals that Browning felt he could not live up to. The second reason is that he did not respect Shelley as a man. It was around 1858 when Thomas Hookham, a friend of Shelley’s, showed Browning some letters from Shelley’s first wife, Harriet Shelley. When Browning learned of Shelley’s infidelity and treatment of Harriet, he called Shelley “half crazy” and denounced his actions as being “wholly inexcusable” (qtd. in Griffin and Minchin 185). For these reasons, Browning strayed from his Shelleyan fixation. Perhaps Browning disliked *Pauline* because his style at that time mimicked Shelley’s so much, and he wanted to create his own identity as a poet.

There are many parallels between *Pauline* and Shelley’s writings. Note the similarities between lines of *Pauline* and Shelley’s poetry. Frederick Pottle compares *Pauline* with Shelley’s writings in his book *Shelley and Browning*:

Browning: [...] Whose brow burned
 Beneath the crown, to which her secrets knelt. (19-20)

- Shelley: Hot shame shall burn upon thy secret brow. (*Adonais* 37.8)
- Browning: Who learned the spell which can call up the dead.(21)
- Shelley: [...] I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing up some lone ghost
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. (*Alastor*, 23-29)
- Browning: And then departed, smiling like a fiend
Who has deceived God. (22-23)
- Shelley: [...] When Nero
High over flaming Rome, with savage joy
Lowered like a fiend. (*Queen Mab*, 3. 180-182) (44)

It appears that Browning's and Shelley's voices are intertwined in these selections. Notice the way the words "brow," "burn," and "secret" are repeated in *Pauline* and Shelley's *Adonais*. It appears as though Browning, in respect of Shelley, playfully twisted Shelley's words to fit into *Pauline*. Likewise, "call up the dead," from *Pauline*, is similar to, "forcing up some lone ghost," in *Alastor*. And finally, *Pauline*'s "smiling like a friend" is comparable to *Queen Mab*'s "savage joy lowered like a fiend." One can almost see Browning writing *Pauline* with copies of Shelley's books next to him.

Robert Browning published *Pauline* anonymously in 1833. Browning's friend, William Johnson Fox, reviewed the poem in the *Monthly Repository*. He also asked John Stuart Mill if he would not mind writing a review about the poem. According to biographer Nicholas Capaldi:

Mill wrote some kind words about it. However, for a variety of circumstantial reasons, Mill could not get his positive review published in any of his usual outlets. At the same time, Mill had expressed his real, and somewhat negative, opinion to Fox by writing a few comments on the flyleaf of his copy...The copy was given to Fox along with the request that it not be shown to Browning. Unfortunately, Fox ignored Mill's request, and Browning later saw the comments...Browning was so embarrassed that he did not reprint the poem until his collected works appeared thirty-five years later, and then only reluctantly. It seems as if Browning came to share Mill's evaluation of the early work. (Capaldi 105)

Interestingly enough, Browning later agreed with Mill's harsh analysis. In 1888, Browning republished the poem with an introductory note that read:

Twenty years' endurance of an eyesore seems more than sufficient: my faults remain duly recorded against me, and I claim permission to somewhat diminish these, so far as style is concerned, in the present and final edition where "Pauline" must needs, first of my performances, confront the reader. I have simply removed solecisms, mended the metre a little, and endeavoured to strengthen the phraseology—experience helping, in some degree, the helplessness of juvenile haste and heat in their untried adventure long ago. (qtd. in DeVane 40)

As Browning began to mature as a writer, he looked upon his early writings with disgust. He even calls *Pauline* an "eyesore" because he dislikes it so much. Perhaps he condemned *Pauline* because it was strongly influenced by his boyhood idol, Shelley. Shelley was deceased by the time young Browning discovered his poetry, but the impact Shelley had on Browning is easily perceived. Though he read Shelley as a teenager and adopted Shelley's liberal politics and philosophies, by the time he wrote *Pauline* at the age of twenty, Browning had moved on from his boyish obsessiveness of the poet. Yet the roots of Shelley were still embedded in Browning's mind. Even up to his death in 1889, Browning thought highly of Shelley. To give an example, Frederick Pottle writes,

“[...] passionate regret for the past is a typical Shelleyan attitude” (43). This “passionate regret” is easily seen throughout *Pauline*. Here are a few lines:

Ere I can be—as I shall be no more. (27)

And with an aim—not being what I am. (88)

Believing I was still what I have been. (580)

Wiser and better, know me now, not when
You loved me as I was. (934-935)

Browning might have disliked *Pauline* because his style mimicked Shelley’s so much. On the other hand, Browning might have loathed *Pauline* because it was built upon a naïve and boyish plan. Frederick Pottle writes:

On an October evening in 1832, [Browning] went to see...Richard III at Richmond. That evening, stirred to high dreams as one never is except at great drama, he conceived a gigantic scheme. He would write a great poem, compose a great opera, write a great novel; in short, make a whole series of titanic creations in the different fields of art, all to appear as the work of different men. (30)

Browning thought that this plan would make him famous. He would create a poem, an opera, a novel, etc. and he would make them appear as if different men wrote them. He gave up on the plan, however, after he wrote *Pauline*, either because he thought the plan was naïve, or he was displeased with *Pauline*.

Browning called this plan “foolish” in his own copy of *Pauline*. He writes:

The following poem was written in pursuance of a foolish plan which occupied me mightily for a time, and which had for its object the enabling me to assume and realize I know not how many different characters...The present abortion was the first work of the Poet of the batch, who would have been more legitimately myself. (qtd. in Pottle 30)

He refers to his plan as being “foolish” and the poem as an “abortion.” But more interestingly, Browning states that the poet of *Pauline* is “more legitimately myself.” He admits that he wrote the poem autobiographically.

At the time of writing *Pauline*, Browning was a young and profoundly arrogant writer. As a young man, those close to him described him as “undoubtedly spoiled” and “lovable, yet self-centered and selfish. His first two long poems are autobiographical in that they deal with self-centered characters” (qtd. in Pottle 6). In fact, Browning even referred to himself as “spoiled” in one of his early letters to Elizabeth Barrett (Browning and E.B. Browning 33). These qualities came through in his early poetry. In fact, Browning disliked this self-centered poem so much that he hoped that the world would forget about it; and the world almost did! William Sharp writes, “But after a time the few admirers of “*Pauline*” forgot to speak about it: the poet himself never alluded to it: and in a year or two it was almost as though it had never been written” (Sharp 52).

Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke also echo these sentiments when writing about the time Dante Rossetti determined that *Pauline* was written by Browning:

How completely “*Pauline*” was forgotten is shown by an anecdote told of Rossetti’s coming across it in the British Museum...and guessing...that it was by the author of “*Paracelsus*.” Delighted with it, he transcribed it. If he had not, it might have remained buried there to this day, for Browning was very loath to acknowledge this early child of his genius. (*Pauline; Paracelsus* xvi-xvii)

Porter and Clarke describe *Pauline* as an early indicator of Browning’s genius, but Browning did not share the same attitude. Near the end of his life, he edited and published *Pauline* again, but he made revisions. Notice the distinction between lines 883-884 from 1833 and his corrections in 1888:

1833: And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one / Who shadowed out the stages of all life...

1888: And then thou said'st a perfect bard was one / Who chronicled the stages of all life... (DeVane 40)

By reading the two selections, it is easy to determine Browning's maturity as a writer. William Clyde DeVane notes that the earlier version "reveals the autobiographical and confessional poet...the later shows the 'dramatic' poet which he strove to become" (40). Browning's maturity can be seen in the change of words. Instead of saying a perfect writer shadows the stages of life, he says that the writer records or archives the stages of life. Looking back on his life of writing, Browning knew that some of his earlier wording needed clarity.

Knowing Browning's early Shelleyan influence as a poet as well as his growth from adolescence, it is now simple to see how autobiographical in nature *Pauline* is. *Pauline* was intensely autobiographical, and Browning even admitted to the autobiographical nature of his early poems, but how are they autobiographical? Frederick A. Pottle writes, "His first two long poems [*Pauline* and *Paracelsus*] are autobiographical in that they deal with self-centered characters. He was always impatient and sometimes violent of temper" (6). I documented earlier how Browning was spoiled and egocentric as a young man, and it comes out in his early writings. In *Pauline*, Browning writes,

I am made up of an intensest life,
Of a most clear idea of consciousness
Of self, distinct from all its qualities,
From all affections, passions, feelings, powers;
And thus far it exists, if tracked, in all:
But linked in me, to self-supremacy,
Existing as a centre to all things. (268-274)

Browning's intense, self-absorbed nature makes itself known in these lines and throughout *Pauline*. By comparison, in *Paracelsus*, Browning writes,

I am above them like a god, there's no
Hiding the fact: what idle scruples, then,
Were those that ever bade me soften it,
Communicate it gently to the world,
Instead of proving my supremacy,
Taking my natural station o'er their head,
Then owning all the glory was a man's! (294-300)

It is clear that the narrators within these two poems are very self-indulgent.

Browning's youth is reflected in the egotistical statements made through his narrators' mouths. But Browning was a child of the self-absorbed Romantic movement. In *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth wrote:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (8)

These beliefs were the core of Romantic writing. Upon looking at this statement closely, one can see that the Romantic movement was author-centered. A Romantic writer would be a person with heightened awareness and be capable of pondering an idea over a long period, resulting in poetry of robust feelings. In the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth uses "feelings" and "emotions" to describe the act of poetry. Poetry does not happen all at once, but is steady and builds up over time until it "spontaneously" flows out of the poet. Simply put, knowing how self-absorbed the Romantic movement was, one can hardly blame Browning for his arrogance when he modeled his writing after the Romantics such as Byron and Shelley.

John Stuart Mill's negative criticism had such an impact on Browning that it seems he spent the majority of the middle of his career trying to invent historical and imaginative narrators with their own creative voices. Browning's second work, *Paracelsus*, was published in 1835, followed by *Sordello* in 1840. In these works, Browning wrote about historical figures in an attempt to distance himself from the voice within the poem. *Paracelsus* was a Renaissance physician and *Sordello* was a troubadour during the Middle Ages. Daniel Burt writes:

[These early poems were] monodramas dealing with geniuses who, despite their apparent external failure, ultimately attain spiritual success. These apprentice works show Browning developing his personal style, gradually effacing his own personality through dramatic personae, and correcting a tendency toward wordiness with the fragmented style of conversation and consciousness itself. The result often was incomprehensible to his first readers. (217)

This incomprehensibility angered many would-be readers of Browning's work. In 1868, Browning apologized for his difficulty, writing, "I can have but little doubt that my writing has been, in the main, too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with..." (qtd. in Burt 217). This was a fact that bothered him. His popularity grew after publishing *Paracelsus*, and he would have been a more popular author had he made *Sordello* more intelligible. The fame he gained from the former was lost after publishing *Sordello*.

In *Pauline*, Browning writes, "I am made up of an intensest life" (line 268).

Author Rosemary Sprague writes about the intensity of Browning's life:

[He] transmits that life to whatever scene he uses, making it live and breath and act. His people are equally fascinating...they are so vital that they make us believe that they actually live and speak in their own voices of their joy, sorrow, hatred, passion, and love [...] Above all, he gives us his vision and "intensest life"—the vision and

life of a man who...longed for greatness, worked for greatness, and finally achieved greatness even beyond his intensest dreams. (12)

It is noted above that Sprague thinks that Browning's characters seem so alive and they seem to speak in their own voices. Certainly, this is true; Browning created characters with extreme precision. To be distinguished, though, is the fact that many of Browning's characters reflect a fragment of their author, and that is the reason that they seem so alive.

For the next forty years after the publication of *Pauline* and after receiving John Stuart Mill's criticism, Browning resolved to produce characters that could, in no way, seem self-portrayed; however, it appears that Browning was unsuccessful in this endeavor. Many of Browning's works contain remnants of his life.

Chapter 2: Browning-Selves and Growing Autobiographical Comfort

Harold Bloom and Adrienne Munich write of Browning: “He is a great lover—but primarily of himself, or rather of his multitude of antithetical selves” (3). And that is exactly what Browning’s narrators are—contradictory, yet related selves. Leslie Brisman writes, “By entering each and all of his monologuists, he [Browning] has half revealed himself—the side of himself “finished” and available for public inspection” (40). It has already been mentioned that Browning considered himself a very conceited and spoiled young man, and some of Browning’s most self-absorbed narrators lie within “My Last Duchess,” “Porphyria’s Lover,” and “Andrea del Sarto.” Bloom refers to Browning’s narrators as “Browning-selves,” meaning that the narrators represent a part of Browning himself or are, at least, representative of his personal beliefs (Bloom and Munich 6). These narrators are not exact duplicates of Browning, only poetic exaggerations. Browning decided to distance himself from his writings by creating narrators that were ostensibly unlike him. By creating these storytellers, Browning was either consciously or unconsciously attempting to exorcize the inner demons of his “intense and morbid self-consciousness”; the poem “Cleon” is a great example of this practice. By writing that poem, Browning expressed his feelings toward his critics openly. This poem provides the evidence of Browning’s growth past John Stuart Mill’s criticism as well as his ability to write with a more personal voice. By looking closely at these four poems, it is plain to see that Browning, whether intentionally or not, inserted pieces of himself into his storytellers and the themes of his works.

Both “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” are attacks on Victorian ideals for relationships between men and women. Browning disliked the public’s praise of piety and the public’s taste for scandal in Victorian society. He could not understand how the two could live hand-in-hand. Cornelia D.J. Pearsall writes that in these poems, “[b]oth the speaker and the poet are attempting to create reactions and larger social transformations in the world outside of the poem” (79). The Victorian era paved the way for the loss of familial secrecy. Hearing of Victorian scandals, the people of that time were becoming desensitized to the offenses. About the Victorian era, Karen Chase and Michael Harry Levenson write, “Adultery, divorce, bigamy, the cruelty of husbands, the flight of wives—these sensational anomalies were stitched into the fabric of authority” (12). “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” face these social issues head-on. Browning offers these two poems as responses to this dichotomy of contrary issues; however, he never offers any answers to the societal problems. The Duke in “My Last Duchess” is representative of the young and pompous Browning. As I quoted earlier, Pottle writes that, as a young man, Browning was “undoubtedly spoiled” and “self-centered and selfish,” exactly as the Duke seems to be (6). In Browning’s own love letters to Elizabeth Barrett, he claims that he was indeed “spoiled” as a young man (Browning and Browning 34). The Duke is also recklessly self-serving and full of insensibility, but he is not deranged; he is simply dominant and controlling. So the Duke is not an exact replica of Browning, just a poetic embellishment of him, meant to make fun of his own self-centered traits and free himself from his creative apprehension. This dominant and

controlling Duke depicts the “cruelty of husbands” that Chase and Levenson discuss. So narcissistic is the Duke that he cannot sympathize, nor empathize, with his last wife at all. In fact, they share very little in common. This is not a marriage based upon love; this is a marriage based upon the Duke’s self-interests. The Duke prefers artificial objects that he can control, such as artwork or his wealth. Ultimately, though, the Duke’s jealousy leads him to believe that his wife is overly flirtatious with other men.

The “flight of wives” expression, as Chase and Levenson call it, falls under the Duchess’ behavior. There are a few explanations for her conduct. Either she was just very happy and enjoyed life to the fullest, or she was unfaithful. The reader tends to view the last Duchess as a woman who loved the simple things in life, but in the following lines, one can see how “flighty” she seems:

[...] She had
 A heart—how shall I say? —too soon made glad,
 Too easily impressed: she liked whate’er
 She looked on (21-24)

The Duchess enjoyed sunsets and riding her mule as well. Each of these things seems honest enough, but there are a few things that anger the Duke. First, the Duke believes that his wife does not appreciate him. He says: “[...] she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift” (32-34). Right here is the problem in their relationship. They do not share the same values. To the Duke, wealth and power are the most substantial things in life; to the Duchess, the opposite is true. Happiness seems to be the most important thing in her life. The second thing that upsets the Duke is the Duchess’ apparent flirtatious behavior. The Duke says: “Sir, ‘t was not / Her husband’s presence

only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek" (13-15). It is here that the Duke implies the Duchess' flirting with the monk painter. He kept a close eye on the Duchess and the artist as well as her behavior around other men:

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. (31-34)

The Duke's inability to control his wife's behavior leads him to think that she is being disloyal to him. But why does the Duke think she is being unfaithful?

The Duke lays out a few reasons:

[...] Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek. (lines 13-15)

[...] she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. (23-24)

The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her. (27-28)

[...] 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. (31-34)

The Duke tries to prove his wife's unfaithfulness with circumstantial evidence, but ultimately there is no direct proof. The only proof of her deceitful acts lies in the Duke's words. He is extremely possessive and jealous, so it is possible that he witnessed a man's friendly act of generosity toward the Duchess—as well as her gracious appreciation toward the giver—and interpreted it as proof of infidelity. The Duke is defined by this quick reaction without searching for tangible proof. In the middle of the poem, the Duke says that he believes her to be disloyal—or unworthy of his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name"—and, therefore, decides

to have her killed (line 33). Though he seems selfish and murderous, he does not have the ability to commit the murder himself. He says: “I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (45-46). In these lines, the Duke gives an order for someone, either an assassin or servant, to murder his wife. He allowed the jealousy and rage to overtake him, thus fulfilling the “cruelty of husbands” expression that Chase and Levenson use.

There might be one final reason that the Duke considered his ex-wife to be adulterous. Kevin Gardner discusses the possibility that the Duke is impotent. He writes:

But what if there was a measure of truth in the duke’s implication of his wife’s sexual misconduct? [...] There is in fact merit in considering that perhaps the duke may have been right about his wife, that she was indeed not only flirtatious but also faithless [...] Extra-textual conjectures might suggest that she was unhappy with her husband’s coldness, cruelty or suspicions, that she had a weakness for men’s compliments, that she had a sexual appetite that could not be sated by one man. (166)

This theory about the Duchess seems to be a stretch; however, Browning could be implying that the Duke did not have the ability to commit the murder himself, so from that understanding, the Duke could be impotent—as in, powerless to commit the murder. And likewise, Browning also seems impotent due to John Stuart Mill’s criticism. The criticism caused Browning to write poems like “My Last Duchess” with narrators that were nothing like Browning himself. However, the careful reader can see that Browning’s Duke is much more like himself than he had planned.

For those that do not think that the Duke could represent a young, egoistical Browning, I quickly offer a secondary idea. Throughout the 1840s,

Browning still had not gained popular acclaim from critics. It was not until after the publication of *Men and Women* in 1855 that Browning enjoyed a little positive recognition from literary reviewers. "My Last Duchess" might be a response to Browning's critics. Ann Wordsworth writes: "Though the Duchess is obliterated, her presence hauntingly survives, figuring indifferently as poetic victory over detractors" (34). The Duke might represent Browning's critics, while the Duchess' "poetic victory" over the Duke could represent Browning's own victory over those critics, with his semblance "hauntingly" withstanding their piercing words.

It is impossible to know exactly whom to support in this dramatic monologue. Naturally, the reader will side with the Duchess because the Duke is such a repulsive narrator, but Browning leaves the possibility open for the Duke to be correct in his assumptions through the accumulation of circumstantial evidence. Direct evidence that the Duchess was unfaithful would strengthen his cause. His supply of circumstantial evidence is interesting, but it is not enough to call the Duchess disloyal. Browning only considers it his duty to raise the questions about contemporary societal mores, such as the "cruelty of husbands" and the "flight of wives." Browning wants to shock his readers; he does not want them to enjoy the poem. He wants his readers to see that there is something wrong with trying to live noble lives while also enjoying stories of moral scandal. Browning offers no ideas of his own; he just wants his readers aware of the problems facing Victorian society.

By writing this poem, Browning was making light of his own self-centered attributes. Browning was showing that he had moved on, either consciously or

unconsciously, from the criticism he received following the publication of *Pauline*. Through the Duke's actions, Browning is freeing himself from the bonds that would not allow himself to write from a personal perspective. In the end, Browning offers no explanation of whom the reader should defend, thus giving himself ultimate control and power over his readers and critics, because he believes that he holds the answer. Is he withholding the answer because of spite? Is he withholding the answer so he cannot be blamed if he is wrong? Some might think Browning would be more controlling if he stood up in front of his readers and claimed whether the Duke or Duchess was correct. That is possible, but by doing so, he would be allowing his answer to be fully inspected and critiqued by critics. By not giving a direct answer, Browning is showing himself to be just as controlling as the Duke. "My Last Duchess" is a great poem revealing a part of Browning himself. By writing from the perspective of the Duke, he is also allowing himself to have full creative control over the meaning of the poem, and allowing his critics none. Browning does the same in "Porphyria's Lover," another poem dealing with a neurotic male narrator.

Though "Porphyria's Lover" was originally published in 1836, it was also published within *Dramatic Lyrics* with "My Last Duchess" in 1842. The speaker in "Porphyria's Lover" is also an egomaniac, but the couple in this poem represents love, unlike the misplaced love between the Duke and Duchess in "My Last Duchess." Isobel Armstrong called Browning's early poems a "systematic attempt to examine many kinds of neurotic or insane behavior" (288). Both "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" are about tumultuous, young relationships and

egocentric men. Both poems' narrators either murder their lover or have their lover murdered. I will not go so far as to say that Browning is like the narrator because they are both neurotics. But I will say that Porphyria's lover, like the Duke, is also a poetic embellishment of Browning's self, in that he is an egomaniac and controlling. Browning will leave this poem up for interpretation as well. Finally, "Porphyria's Lover" also represents Browning's attack on Victorian ideas dealing with the relationships between men and women.

From the beginning of this poem, the reader can discern that the relationship between the two lovers seems steady. Browning writes:

And, last, she sat down by my side
 And call'd me. When no voice replied,
 She put my arm about her waist,
 And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
 And all her yellow hair displaced,
 And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
 And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
 Murmuring how she loved me. (14-21)

The two lovers are holding each other and lying beside a fire. It appears to be a picture-perfect romance, until the reader looks further to note that the narrator is apathetic toward his lover. After traveling through a fierce storm, entering his home, and starting a fire, Porphyria calls out to the narrator, but "no voice replied." Obviously, something seems erroneous in this relationship.

Some readers may venture to say that Porphyria's lover is even more deadly than the Duke is because he actually strangles his lover to death with his own hands. The speaker is so self-interested that to maintain his love, "[h]e strangles Porphyria with her own hair, as a culminating expression of his love and in order to preserve unchanged the perfect moment of her surrender to him"

(Eggenschwiler 40). While lying with his love, he has the audacity to think he has gotten away with murder. The lover says, “And yet God has not said a word” (line 60). The line is a great example of the lover’s egoism. There is also further meaning in this line that will be discussed later.

Browning attempted to free himself from his inner demons by creating this narrator that could, in no way, be traced back to himself. But once again, this is a poem about control. That being said, there are three fascinating interpretations of this poem. Browning disliked discussing his poetry and rather enjoyed leaving his poems up for interpretation. Many critics believe that Porphyria’s lover did not murder her at all. Catherine Ross writes:

The standard reading of this monologue is that the poem’s insane narrator...has murdered her in order to possess her completely or, perhaps, to freeze in time a moment of perfect devotion:

[...] at last I knew
 Porphyria worshiped me; surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 While I debated what to do.
 That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: (32-37)

I would like to suggest that beneath the narrative of the insane, murdering lover, Browning layered a tale of erotic asphyxiation, one in which Porphyria survives. (68)

Ross continues her discussion on the grounds that Porphyria was not murdered at all but—instead—strangled to produce a level of heightened orgasm. It is interesting to think that Browning would have thought of this. Porphyria could represent Browning’s critics, and through the narrator, Browning is shown dominating and strangling those critics into submission. This explanation goes against the Victorian ideals of a sacred, married physical relationship between a man and woman. Browning writes: “And thus we sit together now, / And all night

long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (58-60). Using this interpretation, the poem ends with the lovers lying together after engaging in pre-marital sex and the egotistical narrator is taunting God. Was he expecting to be struck dead by God? This controlling and egoistical narrator is representative of Browning. He desired to be a great poet, but the critics' reviews upset him. In this interpretation, Porphyria could represent Browning's critics, and Browning is shown dominating and controlling them. If he cannot win them over with his poetic style, he can write them into his poetic world and force them into submission. Browning never admits that this might be the correct interpretation, but he leaves the possibility open.

The second interpretation of the poem shows that the narrator had a reason for killing his lover. Porphyria has long been known as a blood disease; even King George III suffered from it in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Though it was not until the 1840s—when this poem was written—that it was becoming a well-known disease. Charles Marquez Lourenço, et al. write that porphyria symptoms include "nausea, vomiting, constipation, pain in the limbs, head, neck, or chest, muscle weakness and sensory loss" (qtd. in Saudubray et al. 524). Victims of Porphyria are especially prone to skin lesions caused by sun exposure, so they tend to have pale skin. This could be the reason for Porphyria's "smooth white shoulder" (line 17) and "pale" (line 28) skin. Browning also knew that Porphyria causes muscle weakness. Browning writes that Porphyria was "too weak, for all her heart's endeavor" (line 22). Knowing his lover was struggling with this disease, the narrator "found a thing to do" (lines 37-

38). He wanted to mercy-kill his lover, so he decides to strangle her with her own hair. Perhaps the couple had a discussion about assisted suicide but they did not make any plans—as seen in the fact that the narrator “debated what to do” (line 35). One could interpret that Porphyria’s “utmost will” was to die and avoid a painful death. It was in the heat of the moment that the narrator decided to kill her when he said, “I found a thing to do” (lines 37-38). If the narrator interpreted the murder as mercy killing, then—without getting into the political and religious argument—that is the reason why he believes that “God has not said a word.” This could serve to explain why Porphyria has a smile upon her face: “The smiling rosy little head, / So glad it has its utmost will, / That all it scorn’d at once is fled” (52-54).

Finally, through careful word placement, Browning hints that Porphyria might be immoral. Pearsall writes, “Her ‘soiled gloves,’ (12) ‘vainer ties,’ (24) and attendance at ‘to-night’s gay feast’ (27) may point [...] to other lovers of Porphyria” (qtd. in Bristow 79). The writing of these sensual words as well as “Blaze,” (9) “dripping,” (11) “shoulder bare,” (17) and “spread” (20) are no mistake. These words are thoughtfully placed to raise suspicion about Porphyria’s morality. In this light, she seems a lot like the Duke’s portrayal of his Duchess. Or even worse, Porphyria is being portrayed as a lady of the night. The “vainer ties” could hint to either a relationship to another man or her business as a prostitute. Either way, she wants to cut those ties and be with the narrator.

These three explanations help the reader gain insight to the reasons Browning had for writing the poem. This narrator could be a Browning-self,

lashing out against his critics. Browning could have also wanted to make his personal feelings known about social problems in society. "Porphyria's Lover," like "My Last Duchess," was obviously written to make readers question Victorian societal ideas. In each of these attacks, Browning exposes the problems of scandal and open sexuality in contemporary society. He wanted his readers to be appalled that something like the murder in "My Last Duchess" or the possible murder in "Porphyria's Lover" might actually happen. Caroline Norton writes about Victorian culture: "Home is no longer a sanctuary, nor a private existence in a man's own power; the character of the mother of a family is about as safe as the life of a brooding dove from a hungry hawk who has spied her; the name of her child may be bandied about coupled with a coarse jest or a lying report" (qtd. in Chase and Levenson 13). Norton is saying that home life was no longer private during the Victorian era. Family secrets could easily be leaked into the public and the children in these families would suffer the consequences. Browning realized this societal problem and he wanted his readers to be conscious of it as well. The next poem, "Andrea del Sarto," also engages societal and marital problems, but within it all, Browning reveals the most about himself.

In 1855, Browning published "Andrea del Sarto" within the *Men and Women* collection. The speaker, like the Duke and Porphyria's lover, is arrogant. He has the gall to refer to himself as the greatest artist, yet he struggles to gain fame and fortune for his work. He seems to be much like Browning, at least on that level. Though the poem was written in 1855, it seems to contain some autobiographical references to Browning's early life, mixed with facts from his life

in the 1850s. This poem's protagonist also seems to share the anxieties that Browning suffered when he decided to distance himself from the Shelleyan beliefs he held as a young man.

Del Sarto, like Browning, is suffering from some inner demons. On top of all of that stress is the fact that his wife is unfaithful to him. In "My Last Duchess," Browning's Duke assumes that his wife has been adulterous, but Andrea del Sarto knows—and seems to support the fact—that his wife is inconstant.

Andrea del Sarto—like Browning—loves his wife and speaks highly of her. She is, after all, the model for his paintings. He says:

[...] you must serve
 For each of the five pictures we require:
 It saves a model. So! Keep looking so—
 My serpentine beauty, rounds on rounds!
 —How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
 Even to put the pearl there! Oh, so sweet—
 My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,
 Which everybody looks on and calls his. (23-30)

She is not, however, an image of Elizabeth Barrett. Harold Bloom agrees with this statement, as he writes, "[del Sarto's] wife is an adulterous gold-digger, the antithesis of the generous and virtuous Elizabeth Barrett" (760).

Andrea del Sarto is also a deeply troubled artist. His problems are beginning to weigh him down. He says: "I often am much wearier than you think, / This evening more than usual" (11-12). Browning, for much of his early professional life, struggled to gain fame and fortune. He also struggled with his religious beliefs. C. R. Tracy writes, "Browning had been reared by his parents in the Evangelical faith, and throughout his life he retained their simple piety as the core of his spiritual being" (610). But as a teenager, Browning read Shelley and

was swayed from his religious beliefs. Harold Bloom writes, “Browning, who hated compromise, had renounced his mother’s Evangelical faith, at fourteen, under Shelley’s influence. After a crisis with his mother, Browning yielded, and never got over his subsequent sense of inner betrayal” (Bloom 759). Browning adopted atheism as a teenager, but eventually decided to follow the Christian faith of his mother. Later in life, it was Rev. William Johnson Fox—the friend who published “complimentary reviews” of *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* in the *Monthly Repository*—who contributed to Browning’s beliefs as a “free thinker” (Tracy 614). A similar sense of betrayal—not religious—can be seen in del Sarto as well. Bloom writes, “[Andrea’s] language, beautifully wrought yet emotionally confused, is the most nuanced of any of Browning’s monologists” (760). Browning achieves a superior quality of speech when del Sarto comes to the realization that he will never be as popular as the great artists are when he writes:

Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp,
 Or what’s a heaven for? All is silver-grey
 Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!
 I know both what I want and what might gain,
 And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
 “Had I been two, another and myself,
 Our head would have o’erlooked the world!”; No doubt. (97-103)

Here, del Sarto recognizes the imperfection in others’ work, but he does not see it in himself, namely his vanity. He wishes that he could have accomplished much more, but realizes that he is just one man. He admits that the great paintings have soul, but his own do not:

But all the play, the insight and the stretch—
 Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?

Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you! (116-119)

At this point, he begins to criticize his wife for his own inadequacies as an artist:

Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think—
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare—
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind! (120-126)

Del Sarto considers the idea that his artwork might be suffering because of the inferior model he uses—his wife. Lerner believes this to be true when he writes, “[del Sarto] tells Lucrezia that her inadequacy as a wife is responsible for his not having reached the greatness of Raphael and Michelangelo, and the modern critic who sees this as evidence against [del Sarto] will almost inevitably propose that it is his unconscious wish to fail as an artist that binds him to Lucrezia” (103). Del Sarto believes that all he needed from his wife as a model was her “soul” (118) and “mind” (126). He says that she gave him neither. Del Sarto remarks that the great artists were able to capture these things within their artwork; however, he is incapable of that because his model is not in possession of either for him to paint.

Del Sarto begins to ponder if he would have been a greater artist if he had not married his wife:

[...] Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
Yet the will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—
And thus we half-men struggle. (135-140)

Browning might have thought the same thing. The great artists did not have wives to distract them; they had wealthy patrons to support them. Browning's writings did, however, gain popularity after marrying Elizabeth, though he did not reach her level of fame until after she died, when he published *The Ring and the Book* between 1868 and 1869. Del Sarto says: "And I have laboured somewhat in my time / And not been paid profusely" (254-255). Those two lines encapsulate Browning's early and middle professional life. Gillian Gill writes:

When *Men and Women* (1855), a collection of fifty dramatic monologues written under Elizabeth's encouragement and now considered his masterpiece, found no critical appreciation and sold a mere two hundred copies, Robert suffered a rebuff to his spirit that he could not overcome. It had always been difficult for him to accept that [...] Elizabeth's escape from Wimpole Street and their subsequent life together were possible only because of her small personal income from inheritance and royalties. (37)

At the time *Men and Women* was published, Browning's wife was much more famous for her literary credentials. Gill writes, "That *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth's magnum opus, written in the same year as *Men and Women*, became an immediate critical success [...] was salt in Robert Browning's wounds" (37). This fact placed significant stress onto the Brownings' marriage, much like the stress on del Sarto's marriage.

As the reader delves deeper into del Sarto's life, he also sees anger:

The whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight piece. Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are! (lines 46-51)

Del Sarto is upset that his life is not as wonderful and privileged as it once was. At one time, the king of France was his patron. But he has suffered a fall from grace. He blames his downfall on God. Del Sarto tells his wife that their lives are so much different ever since they moved to Italy. He believes that God is punishing them. Browning might have felt the same way. The Brownings also moved to Italy after they married, and they lived there until Elizabeth died in 1861. While in Italy, Browning became enamored with art, and much of his poetry reflected that interest. Harold Bloom writes, “Andrea’s subtly perverse stance parodies Browning’s own aesthetic of imperfection, if only because Andrea rates his own potential as a painter very high, reaching to the realm of the greatest: Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo” (Bloom 760). Like del Sarto felt that his talent could equal that of the greatest artists, Browning felt that his talent could equal that of the greatest poets.

In each of these three poems, Browning has exposed social problems and exposed himself through his narrators. The final poem, “Cleon,” is a poem that ties together Browning’s feelings about his own poetry with his feelings about religion and John Stuart Mill’s criticism of *Pauline*.

Though it was published in *Men and Women* in 1855—thirteen years after the publication of “My Last Duchess” and “Porphyria’s Lover” in *Dramatic Lyrics* and twenty-two years after the publication of *Pauline*—“Cleon” was a response to John Stuart Mill’s criticism of *Pauline*. The poem is written as a dramatic monologue and it is about a Greek philosopher named Cleon. The poem’s narrator is alive during the early formation of Christianity by the Apostle Paul, and

he discusses how “artists are threatened by their own creations” (Starzyk 16). To once again separate himself from the narrator of the poem, Browning attempts to create a narrator who shares an opposing view—in this case, a religious one.

Cleon is also an egotistical narrator:

I know the true proportions of a man
And woman also, not observed before;
And I have written three books on the soul,
Proving absurd all written hitherto,
And putting us to ignorance again.
For music,—why, I have combined the moods,
Inventing one. In brief, all arts are mine. (55-61)

He is a man of many artistic talents. He is an artist like Andrea del Sarto, but he is much more successful. In the final line of the poem, Cleon remarks that Christianity’s “doctrine could be held by no sane man” (line 353). There is a reason why that line stands by itself at the very end of the poem. That line hauntingly echoes John Stuart Mill’s criticism toward *Pauline*, when he wrote, “...the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever knew in any sane human being” (qtd. in Starczyk 16). Also, the fact that Cleon speaks of the Apostle Paul is interesting. He writes: “Thou canst not think a mere barbarian Jew, / As Paulus proves to be, one circumcised, / Hath access to a secret shut from us?” (343-345). Obviously, Cleon is mocking the apostle Paul. But more importantly, note the close proximity of the name, Pauline, to Paul. The letters of Paul are often referred to as Pauline epistles. Was “Cleon” a response to John Stuart Mill’s rejection of *Pauline*? If so, since this poem was published in 1855, why did Browning wait so long to respond in verse?

“Cleon” was published about nine years after Browning got married.

During his early writings to Elizabeth, he complained that he could not write from a personal perspective like she could. At this time, he was still very protective of his writing. He writes:

For you do what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time—you speak out, you—I only make men & women speak,—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me: but I am going to try.
(Browning and E. B. Browning 6)

Before he even met his wife, he held her ability to write from a personal perspective very highly. It was only after they were married that he felt comfortable with himself enough to consciously include his personal voice.

“Cleon” is a wonderful example showing how much more comfortable Browning later was about including his personal voice within his poetry, even though he hides his personal beliefs by using irony in the poem. But Browning was still not completely comfortable with the idea. Browning included a few autobiographical hideaways within this work, but he did so in a semi-secretive way. It would not be until much later in his career that he would feel comfortable enough writing in his personal voice.

Browning’s narrators in these four poems represent a piece of himself. Both the Duke and Porphyria’s lover reflect Browning’s early and egocentric life. Both narrators are self-serving, much like Browning was as a young man—and as was discussed in Chapter 1 on *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. Both narrators also represent a Browning that desperately wants success, even if it means forcefully controlling everything and everyone around him. “My Last Duchess,” “Porphyria’s

Lover,” and “Andrea del Sarto” all deal with Victorian social and moral problems. Whether he chose to consciously include those personal beliefs or not, is up for discussion. I believe that by the time Browning published “Andrea del Sarto”—his most autobiographical work after *Pauline*—he was becoming increasingly more comfortable with including confessional niches into his works. The poem, “Cleon,” proves that point. Looking at the parallels, the poem is most certainly an attack against Browning’s detractors, but it also represents Browning’s growing comfort with writing in a more personal voice.

Chapter 3: Browning's Parleyings

In the first chapter, I briefly analyzed Shelley's influence on Browning. Unfortunately, literary authorities are unsure about the lesser-known writings that influenced Browning. John Woolford writes that it is known Browning "traversed the usual terrain—classics, Shakespeare, Milton and so on" (Armstrong 7). Sure, Browning read classical literature, but he read other material as well. To find some of this material, it is important to read *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*. Of all Browning's later writings, *Parleyings* is the most autobiographical. It is true that the great artists fascinated Browning. By the time *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* was published in 1887, Harold Bloom says that Browning no longer felt "deep anxiety" over his own artistic creations (Genius 760). *Parleyings* is a collection of fictional conversations between Browning and artists. These fictional conversations indicate that Browning had come to terms with John Stuart Mill's criticism and allowed him to consciously write from a personal perspective in his own dramatic verse. There are two conceivable reasons why Browning decided to write *Parleyings*. The first reason is that Browning wanted to share these other authors and artists that influenced not only his writing, but also his mind as a young man. The second reason he wrote *Parleyings* was to express his philosophy on writing. With this understanding, it is possible to see that by 1887, Browning had come to terms with the negative memory of John Stuart Mill's criticism more than fifty years prior.

John Woolford writes that Browning wrote *Parleyings* for two reasons: “to indicate some of the major sources of his material” and to “activate a final expression of his own philosophy” (Armstrong 7-8). While I do believe there is merit to the former reason, I side with the latter of the two. The English word *parley* comes from the Middle French word meaning “to speak” or “to have a conference or discussion” (“Parley” 1048). But why is Browning creating these conversations with these artists? Some think that by writing *Parleyings*, Browning was attacking Romanticism. Woolford writes, “history [provides] ... a positive alternative to the ‘morbid self-consciousness’ of the Romantic. Yes, I think Browning saw history in these terms: as a field for the anti-Romantic enterprise” (Armstrong 14). Woolford continues his thoughts about realism within Browning’s library:

[...] I believe that the library worked for Browning not by providing material so much as techniques, structures, genres, having in common this quality of factuality/human involvement. There is a corresponding dearth of purely imaginative literature: instead we find history, and satire, and encyclopaedias, and books of anecdote: all of which, I hope to show, promote...those variants to fact rather than fancy, the humanistic student of life rather than the febrile poet. (Armstrong 15)

One can see by looking at Browning’s library that he enjoyed reading history, biography, and autobiography. Yes, he might have been influenced to write with certain techniques or qualities due to the content that he read, but the larger motive for his writing *Parleyings* does not lie with his distaste for Romanticism.

Some literary scholars believe that Browning wrote *Parleyings* to present some of his childhood readings to his audience. Woolford writes:

The task of reconstructing Browning's childhood reading is rendered difficult, though not impossible, by the disappearance of much of the evidence...One is obliged to place alongside that catalogue tools which help to process it: hints in biographies, casual reminiscences in letters, of the works which possibly shaped Browning's mind...If only he had responded to [Elizabeth Barrett Browning's] request for a record of his 'early tastes'! Then we would have had what we lack. (Armstrong 6-7)

During their early correspondence through letters, Elizabeth Barrett asked Browning to disclose some of his early readings, but he never answered her question. Elizabeth Barrett said to Browning, "I should like to know what poets have been your sponsors...and whether you have held true to early tastes, or leapt violently from them, and what books you read, and what hours you write in" (*The Letters* 15). Woolford believes that Browning did, "...set out to rectify the omission [of his early readings] by providing the world with an autobiography. That the work, when it appeared, turned out to consist of an intellectual autobiography comprising writers who had influenced his work suggests how important reading had in fact been to Browning..." (qtd. in Armstrong 7). It may be true that Browning wrote the *Parleyings* to reveal some of the authors he read from his father's library, but it is not the only reason.

I believe that the authors Browning invokes within the *Parleyings* assist him to share his philosophies. It took Browning over fifty years to be comfortable enough to openly reveal his personal beliefs within his works. Alexandra L. Sutherland Orr, Browning's intimate friend, says it best when she writes,

It seems as if the accumulated convictions which find vent in the "parleyings" could no longer endure even the form of dramatic disguise; and they appear in them in all the force of direct reiterated statement, and all the freshness of novel points of view. And the portrait is in some degree a biography; it is full of reminiscences.

The “people” with whom Mr. Browning parleys [...] are with one exception his old familiar friends: men whose works connect themselves with the intellectual sympathies and the imaginative pleasures of his very earliest youth. (339)

Orr agrees that *Parleyings* is biographical and full of Browning’s retrospections. But each of the parleyings was not simply written to introduce readers to the library of Browning’s youth. Rather, the *Parleyings* were written to, as Orr so suitably put it, vent Browning’s convictions. These convictions could no longer hide in the form of dramatic verse, so they came about, as clearly as direct statements, within the *Parleyings*.

Parleyings consists of seven fictional conversations between Browning and artists who were “important in their day, virtually unknown in ours” (Orr 339). It also consists of a prologue and epilogue, but I will not branch off into any conversation about either one. Of the seven conversations, I will focus only on three because the seven conversations’ themes are similar. The three selected conversations are with Bernard de Mandeville, Francis Furini, and Gerard de Lairese. John Woolford writes that Browning uses each of these three artists to help him in “constructing a non-imaginative aesthetic, poetry of statement and fact” (Armstrong 16). In creating this poetry of fact, Browning discusses his personal philosophies on the problems of life, the force of evil, the limitations of human knowledge, and the importance of looking forward toward the future.

Bernard de Mandeville lived from 1670-1733 in England. He was best known for writing the political satire, *The Fable of the Bees*. Browning was familiar with Mandeville’s work, as is seen when he discusses the presence of evil in the universe. Trevor Lloyd writes, “The political implication of the doctrine

[of *The Fable of the Bees*] was that, if people were left to do what they wanted to do, the result would be the greatest happiness of the greatest number”

(Armstrong 150). But Stefan Hawlin and Michael Meredith write, “[The parleying with Mandeville’s] central concern is with the ways in which we can and cannot apprehend ultimate reality, the value or otherwise, for religious understanding and perception, of imaginative and symbolic modes of thought” (40). Porter and Clarke write,

Browning [...] interprets Mandeville after his own fashion, and chooses evidently to consider him a prophet of the doctrine of the relativity of evil and good, so popular in recent thought, as a solution of the problem of reconciling evil with an omnipotent and beneficent power. Browning’s own standpoint seems to be that since, through human love, we know that the Infinite power must be capable of love, then we can be sure that evil is allowed for some good purpose. (“The Complete Works” 325)

With all of these thoughts in his mind, Browning decides to write the parleying to discern humans’ limited knowledge and to find out why evil exists and why it seemingly overcomes virtue at times.

Browning was fascinated with the limitations of human thought. Browning writes:

Man’s fancy makes the fault;
 Man with the narrow mind, must cram inside
 His finite God’s infinitude, —earth’s vault
 He bids comprise the heavenly far and wide,
 Since man may claim a right to understand
 What passes understanding. (150-155)

Browning understands the limitations of the human mind, but he is unwilling, at this point in the parleying, to admit that he cannot conclude why evil is allowed to exist. He begins to wonder if there is a greater purpose for evil:

Ask him—"Suppose the Gardener of Man's ground
Plants for a purpose, side by side with good,
Evil—(and that He does so—look around!
"What does the field show?)"—were it understood
That purposely the noxious plant was found
Vexing the virtuous, poison close to food,
If, at first stealing-forth of life in stalk
And leaflet-promise, quick His spud should baulk
Evil from budding foliage, bearing fruit? (95-103)

The thought that God would allow weeds to grow makes Browning wonder if there is indeed a purpose for evil in the world. Perhaps God has a reason for allowing evil in the world and Browning cannot fully comprehend it. Browning continues these thoughts about the limits of human thought when he imagines that, to conquer these limits, man finds wings to soar above the confinement of human thought. He writes:

And he discovers—wings in rudiment,
Such as he boasts, which full-grown, free-distant
Would lift him skyward, fail of flight while pent
Within humanity's restricted space.
Abjure each fond attempt to represent
The formless, the illimitable! Trace
No outline, try no hint of human face
Or form or hand! (163-170)

About halfway through the parleying, Browning comes to the conclusion that humans are incapable of understanding the ways of an infinite God, but he continues to strive to find an answer for why evil exists. He ends up calling this journey an "idle quest" (315). With no further argument, he cries out, "mind, infer

immensity!” (317). Interestingly enough, Browning comes to the same conclusion about evil as Mandeville. He admits that one can try to understand why evil is allowed in the world, but it would be futile to try.

Much like the parleying with Mandeville, the parleying with Francis Furini deals with the existence of good and evil, but it also concerns knowing the physical body that houses the soul. The parleying with Francis Furini is based upon a story of Furini on his deathbed. Furini was an Italian priest and painter during the 1600s. At the beginning of the poem, Browning paints a picture of the goodness of Furini:

Nay, that, Furini, never I at least
Mean to believe! What man you were I know,
While you walked Tuscan earth, a painter-priest,
Something about two hundred years ago.
Priest—you did duty punctual as the sun
That rose and set above Saint Sano’s church,
Blessing Mugello: of your flock not one
But showed a whiter fleece because of smirch. (lines 1-8)

Furini, according to Browning, was a man who transcended the men of his time. He carried out his duties as a priest and made the people around him better. However, after reading the story about Furini told by Philip Baldinucci, Browning could not believe its truth. Porter and Clarke write:

[Browning] declares that he cannot believe the story told of Furini by Baldinucci, that when [Furini] was on his death-bed...he begged his friends to buy and burn all his pictures, to make amends for the fact that in them he had painted women nude. (*The Complete Works* 345)

Though Browning could not believe that Furini would ask for his nude paintings to be destroyed, the story is a fact. Porter and Clarke write: “The incident upon which the poem is based is true, for on his death-bed [Furini] asked that all his

undraped pictures might be collected and destroyed, though his request was not carried out" (*The Complete Works* 350).

Disbelieving Baldinucci's account is what made Browning decide to write this conversation with Furini. Browning could not believe that an artist would ask for his nude paintings to be destroyed. Browning defends this belief throughout the poem, even to the point of calling Baldinucci a "Blockhead" (119). And he continues:

Even through death-mist, as to grope in gloom
 For cheer beside a bonfire piled to turn
 Ashes and dust all that your noble life
 Did homage to life's Lord by, - bid them burn
 --These Baldinucci blockheads—pictures rife
 With record, in each rendered loveliness,
 That one appreciative creature's debt
 Of thanks to the Creator, more or less,
 Was paid according as heart's-will had met
 Hand's-power in Art's endeavor to express
 Heaven's most consummate of achievements, bless
 Earth by semblance of the seal God set
 On woman his supremest work. (122-134)

Browning defends his position by referring to Furini's nudes as lovely and as representative of the ultimate symbol of perfection by God. Baldinucci seems to make the argument that Furini would want to burn his nude paintings because they represent "abuse" of his artistry (line 103). But here, Browning explains that there was no perversity in Furini's painting, rather, it was the "heart's will" and "hand's power" expressing appreciation toward God. But Browning does not stop there. Browning's tone toward Baldinucci grows fierce:

You, of the daubings, is it, dare advance
 This doctrine that the Artist-mind must needs
 Own to affinity with yours—confess
 Provocative acquaintance, more or less,

With each impurely-peevisish worm that breeds
 Inside your brain's receptacle? (215-220)

Browning asserts that Baldinucci's artistic doctrine claims that it is impossible to paint a nude without a sinful thought. Browning implies that Baldinucci is simply a complainer with nothing better to do. Porter and Clarke write that "[Baldinucci] is only a poor pretender, who regards the nude in art merely from the point of view of the sensualist, and knowing himself to be such, teaches others that all noble art in the nude has been instigated by sensual thoughts" (*The Complete Works* 346). About halfway into the parleying, Browning grows tired of insulting Baldinucci and he says, "Hence with you!" (line 232). Browning then turns his attention to the misinterpretation of nude art.

Browning offers an apology for those who misunderstand nude art. He writes: "[...] still, some few / Have grace to see thy purpose, strength to mar / Thy work by no admixture of their own" (243-245). Browning knows that there are some educated people who can admire nude artwork and not only see the beauty of the outside body, but also take note of the artwork's soul. This finally brings Browning and Furini to the discussion of good and evil.

At this point, Browning allows Furini to speak. Porter and Clarke write: "[Furini] declares that just here is his solid-standing place; that from the operations of his soul and body upon each other he learns how things outside teach what is good and what evil, whether fact or feigning be the teacher" (*The Complete Works* 349). And to know the things that are outside, Browning writes that all one has to do is "look around" and "learn thoroughly" (537-538). Furini believes that the way to understand the difference between good and evil is to be

familiar with the outside of the body because, once one understands the outside of the body, one can know the soul inside the body that much better. So moving from the place of evil in the universe, to understanding the difference between good and evil, the parleying with Gerard de Lairesse focuses on Browning's life philosophy and the importance of focusing on the present.

The parleying with Gerard de Lairesse focuses on two things: Browning's displeasure with classical art and looking toward the future rather than looking to the past. Lairesse lived from 1644-1711, the late Renaissance period. Like many Renaissance artists, much of his work idolizes mythology and antiquity. Orr writes:

De Lairesse was a man of varied artistic culture as well as versatile skill; but he was saturated with the pseudo-classical spirit of the later period of the Renaissance; and landscape itself scarcely existed for him but as a setting for mythological incident or a subject for embellishment for it. (355)

Lairesse became blind late in life and, since he had difficulty painting, he decided to write treatises on painting and drawing. Orr writes: "An English version of [these treatises] fell into Mr. Browning's hands while he was yet a child, and the deep and, at the time, delightful impression which it made upon him is the motive of the present poem" (355).

Browning begins the poem by praising the works of Lairesse. He even offers a purpose for why he chose to write the poem. He writes that he wanted "to pay due homage to the man I loved / Because of that prodigious book he wrote" (line 32-33). Browning then begins to wonder if Lairesse's lack of physical vision is actually his strength. He writes:

Say am I right? Your sealed sense moved your mind,
 Free from obstruction, to compassionate
 Art's power left powerless, and supply the blind
 With fancies worth all the facts denied by fate.
 Mind could invent things, add to—take away,
 At pleasure, leave out trifles mean and base
 Which vex the sight that cannot say them nay. (88-94)

By not having vision, Lairesse is, in a sense, free from the confines of nature.

Browning even makes the point that—as Porter and Clarke write—Lairesse's blindness can “supply the blind with fancies better than facts fate denied” (*The Complete Works* 352). This is another example of Browning's attack on Romanticism. He ponders if it is better to “mingle false with true” (line 116). He prefers, from the beginning, to “contentedly abide” on the earth rather than dream up some fanciful adventure of flying (line 111). Browning believed that it was better to live in the present than to live in the past, an argument that I will discuss further in a little bit. But for the time being, Browning allows himself to temporarily suspend his distaste for neoclassicism and see the world through a fanciful concoction of nature and mythology.

On this journey, Browning takes the reader through the length of one day and introduces scenes from ancient Greek myths. Orr writes:

In the early dawn we see Prometheus amidst departing thunders chained to his rock; the glutted, yet still hungering vulture cowering beside him; in the dews of morning, Artemis triumphant in her double character of huntress-queen and goddess of sudden death; in the heats of noon, Lyda and the Satyr, enacting the pathetic story of his passion and her indifference; in the lengthening shadows, the approaching shock of the armies of Darius and Alexander; —in the falling night, a dim, silent, deprecating figure: in other words, a ghost. (356-357)

Through each of these myths, Browning is trying to prove that he can call upon the ancient myths at any time, but he does not allow his mind to fixate on the myths of the past. As Orr says, Browning “has only changed in this, that his chosen visions are of the soul; their objects are no longer visible unrealities, but the realities which are unseen” (356). Browning wants the past to stay in the past while he resides in the present.

At the conclusion of his journey into the myths, Browning comes to an abrupt halt. He writes:

Enough! Stop further fooling, De Lairesse!
My fault, not yours! Some fitter way express
Heart's satisfaction that the Past indeed
Is past, gives way before Life's best and last
The all-including Future! (363-367)

Browning immediately tells himself to stop and think of a better way to express why the past should remain in the past. It is here that he writes, “Let things be—not seem” (389). He thinks that artists should begin rendering images of the present—or the future—rather than images of the past. Browning writes, “The dead Greek lore lies buried in the urn” (392). That line is particularly interesting because it echoes John Keats’ poem, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*. Keats, of course, was one of the most important writers of the Romantic movement. In the poem, Keats engages in a one-way discussion with an ancient urn. The urn is decorated with various pictures of Greek lore. Of course, the lesson from the poem is that the urn will continue to live on long after the narrator is dead, and the pictures on the urn will tell future generations about the wonders of the past. But Browning would argue against this Romantic ideal. In his conversation with Lairesse,

Browning tells the artist that Greek lore is dead. He thinks that Lairesse's works, while beautiful and respected, depict nothing more than the lore of the past.

The *Parleyings* is one of Browning's most autobiographic works because it permits the reader to walk through Browning's mind. This work incorporates some of the authors that influenced Browning's young mind—Lairesse especially—and the *Parleyings* also show Browning's philosophies about life. Browning knows that the human mind is limited, and it is best to trust that God—or fate—allows things to happen for a reason. Consequently, Browning agrees that evil cannot exist in the world without good. In dealing with evil, Browning also believes that one can only know what is evil by understanding the soul. And finally, Browning contemplates the problem with neoclassicism. He argues that, when it comes to art and life, it is best to leave thoughts of fancy and imagination behind and strive toward the future without looking back. As a realist, he wants people to accept things as the way that they are.

Conclusion

In 1833, John Stuart Mill criticized Browning's very first poem, *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession*, because it exposed the author's "intense and morbid self-consciousness" (Starzyk 16). This criticism affected Browning's writings throughout his life. It provoked Browning to formulate dramatic monologues in an attempt to create separation between his characters and himself. But, even though Browning tried to distance himself from his poetry, his "intense and morbid self-consciousness" still made its way through to the reader. In the

dramatic monologues, Browning—unknowingly—created characters that epitomized himself at certain stages of his life. William H. Marshall writes,

The whole of life constitutes the poet's material, according to Browning, but its apparent discontinuity imposes formal limitations upon his art. To penetrate any of the individual lives with which he deals, he must assume a role by which he both masks his personality and [...] intensifies his identity as a poet. The dramatic monologue [...] is ideally suited to the concentrated expression of that inner conflict from which emerge glimpses of the reality that the poet seeks (201-202).

But by 1887, near the end of his career when *Parleyings* was published, Browning had come to terms with John Stuart Mill's criticism fifty-four years earlier. He had matured and gained respect as a writer by that time, and he had learned to accept criticism. This allowed him to write from a more personal perspective and incorporate his vast knowledge about the limitations of man, the existence of evil, and his problems with Romanticism.

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