CRITICAL RESPONSE TO SORDELLO WAS ALMOST universally condemnatory. Browning felt himself pelted with “cabbage stump after potato-paring” (New Letters, p. 18). In an effort to redeem his reputation, he wished to publish, as soon as possible, three plays that he had been working on and put aside to complete Sordello. At the suggestion of Edward Moxon, the publisher of Sordello, he decided to approach the public in a different way: printing his works not in boards but in a series of inexpensive pamphlets, priced at sixpence or a shilling (the last two, longer pamphlets selling at two shillings), the cost of publication to be borne by the poet’s father. The series was entitled Bells and Pomegranates, a name that proved for most readers a pure mystification until the author, at the urging of Elizabeth Barrett, explained in the last number that it was meant “to indicate an endeavour towards something like an alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought.” In all there were eight pamphlets—seven plays (two in the final number) and two collections of shorter poems—extending from April 1841 to April 1846.

The initial number was Pippa Passes. We know nothing about its composition. The poem seems to reflect memories of Browning’s visit to Italy in 1838, and in all likelihood was written after the completion of Sordello in the spring of 1839. It will be recalled that in book three of Sordello the poet witnesses in Saint Mark’s Square some market girls come to the city from the area around Venice, even “from our delicious Asolo” (683), that his heart goes out to them, and that he reorients the poem he is writing to serve them as symbols of suffering humanity. He had, in short, been touched by them. Browning, however, was always suspicious not only of others’
but also of his own feelings and motives; and he must have wondered, as he looked back upon the experience, what its true nature was, what being “touched” means. Is it simply sentimentality, the inflation of the emotions to match the pathos of the scene? Does one in fact ascribe values to the “toucher” that are not really there, “invest / The lifeless thing with life from [one’s] own soul” (*Sordello*, 1.490–91)? Was it anything more than pretense? Moreover, such questions might be posed not only about the nature of love but also about the nature of poetry. What does it mean to say that poetry has an effect, such as both *Sordello* and the poet-narrator of the long poem wish it to have? It was questions like these that Browning wished to investigate in his next work.

Fresh from the Italian background of *Sordello*, Browning decided to set his new poem again in Northeastern Italy, not however during the early Renaissance but during the contemporary period, the very time of the personal digression in *Sordello*, book three. Furthermore, he would investigate the problem from the reverse situation—that is, not so much from the point of view of the one “touched” as from that of the one “touching.” Mrs. Sutherland Orr reports that Browning was walking alone in a wood “when the image flashed upon him of some one walking thus alone through life; one apparently too obscure to leave a trace of his or her passage, yet exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every step of it; and the image shaped itself into the little silk-winder of Asolo, Felippa, or Pippa” (*Orr, Handbook*, p. 55).

Such an image and such a situation would almost inevitably suggest the role of the poet with respect to his audience and, in Browning’s case, would have brought to mind his own career as one who had consciously decided to define his own poetic gift as different and distinct from that of his immediate predecessors. What if he had become the kind of poet that J. S. Mill wanted all poets to be, a singer overheard? What if this ”little silk-winder of Asolo” were to sing and her songs were to be overheard by various people? The basic conception of the poem dictated a fragmentary structure of various points of view, and it could only produce ironic results.

Pippa’s songs are overheard by eight people whom she
falsely presumes to be the happiest inhabitants of Asolo. Four of them interpret her song as having some special significance for themselves individually. As in Paracelsus there is again a poetry of moments with no pretense of a continuous narrative, an understanding of the poem depending upon the reader’s "co-operating fancy." Like Strafford it is cast in the form of a drama, but one to be read and not enacted upon the stage.

On her annual holiday from the silk mill, Pippa rises early in expectation of living the day fully by pretending to participate in the life of others. Her speech is packed with brilliant, sensuous images of nature, each following another with great rapidity and seemingly little development, like the sun that "boils, pure gold" and "overflowed the world" (Intro., 1–12.)

Hers is a Keatsian world of living and growing things, each observed in its minutest and most detailed aspects: the exotic lily "ruddy as a nipple, / Plump as the flesh bunch on some Turk bird's poll" that she guards "from weevil and chafer." In this world there is no human other than Pippa, who is "queen of thee, floweret" (Intro., 90–100). Insofar as persons exist in this contracted sphere, it is only in fancy, as she begins her holiday by going

down the grass path gray with dew,
'Neath the pine-wood, blind with boughs,
Where the swallow never flew
As yet, nor cicale dared carouse:
No, dared carouse.

(Intro., 209–14)

Pippa is, in short, a Romantic nature poet whose song, like that of the cicada, is heard only from afar and in no direct relation to humankind.

Pippa's only mode of utterance is lyric, unlike that of other characters in the poem. As she moves in the varied human world, she "carouses" with pimps, prostitutes, hired assassins, paid informers, murderers, debauched students, adulterous lovers, newlyweds, worldly clergymen; and she is as untouched by them as the cicada would be. Insofar as she enters their world at all, it is unknowingly or fancifully. Absolutely
untouched by the real world, she comes away from it confirmed in her preconception that those who have heard her song are Asolo's happiest ones.

Yet instinctively Pippa realizes at the end of her day that fancy is not adequate to sustain life. The holiday, which was to invigorate her for the coming year, is past. And she: "what am I?—tired of fooling!" (4. 291, 293). In addition, the natural world that she delights in is also insufficient to support human needs—even, in fact, to support itself: the bee, the mouse, the grub—they "wile winter away"; but the firefly, the hedge-shrew, the log worm—how fare they (4. 239–44)? What Pippa really wants is dialogue and relationship, to "approach all these / I only fancied being , so as to touch them, move them some slight way" (4. 340–42). As Sordello discovered, nature and fancy "hardly avail . . to soothe" (Sordello, 1. 966–67). The fancy cannot cheat so well. Like the young Keats, the lyricist must forgo make-believe—pretenses about men and nature—for the agony and strife of human hearts if he is ever to be anything more than the idle singer of an empty day. He must in short cease to hold the notion of being a "bard."

The psychic necessity of dialogue and relationship is further exemplified in all four episodes of the poem. Like Pippa each of the protagonists is caught in a web of illusions of his own making and each sees himself as playing a role in life's drama. Pippa perceives herself as "Pippa," frequently speaking of herself by this name in the third person. She never alludes to herself as Felippa, but only as Pippa the poor, loving, singing silk-winding girl, one of God's puppets whose service ranks the same as others' and whose only amusement is pretending to be someone else. It is a kind of Shirley Temple role, although at fourteen, roughly the same age as Phene and Luigi, she is a bit old for the part.

In the first episode, "Morning," Sebald casts himself in the role of Romantic Lover, a man of grand passion, for which the world is well lost. He has killed Ottima's old husband more or less for an idea—an idea of reckless passion. If he has to suffer for it, at least he will have lived splendidly. "One must be venturesous and fortunate— / What is one young for else?" (1. 136–
Yet the "recompense" has not been adequate: he cannot escape the guilt and the shame, not so much out of moral outrage as out of aesthetic disgust. A crime passionel is surely excusable and perhaps even commendable. But this!

> to have eaten Luca's bread—have worn
> His clothes, have felt his money swell my purse—
> Why, I was starving when I used to call.

He gave me

Life—nothing less.

(1.140–42, 146–47)

Lovers in romances do not act this way. No, this role has been played badly. "Let us throw off / This mask. Let's out / With all of it!" (1.40–42).

Ottima, however, would continue the play. "Best never speak of it," she says in allusion to the hideousness of the crime. Sebald nevertheless wants to "speak again and yet again of it." He will rise above mere "cant" and, in the new role of one who boldly speaks the truth, will eschew all euphemisms and say, "I am his cut-throat, you are—." But he is not quite sure about the new parts to be played by Ottima and himself: "But am I not his cut-throat? What are you?" (1.52, 57). Ottima still insists on the old script and continues as Isolde to his Tristan. Her words of passion have their effect. He who had wished to talk plainly of the murder "till words cease to be more than words" (1.44), now whipped up to feverish state, pleads to Ottima to speak "less vehemently." But at this moment of passionate intensity, she aims to confirm him in the old role: "Crown me your queen, your spirit's arbitress, / Magnificent in sin. Say that!" He begins to repeat her words and has just come to "Magnificent" when Pippa passes by.

Like nearly everyone else in the drama, Sebald has difficulty with language, not only getting his own words right but interpreting those of others. For when Pippa sings her lyric about order in the Great Chain of Being,

> The year's at the spring,
> And day's at the morn:
Morning's at seven;  
The hill-side's dew pearled:  
The lark's on the wing,  
The snail's on the thorn;  
God's in his heaven—  
All's right with the world!

(1. 221–28),

Sebald turns on Ottima to say, “I hate, hate—curse you! God's in his heaven” (1. 269). All passion spent, Sebald throws off the mask of Romantic Lover and, almost as if addressing an audience assembled to witness the play, speaks of Ottima in the third person: even her hair that “seemed to have a sort of life in it, / Drops a dead web” (1. 257–59, 246–47). Isolde the queen is shown to be merely Vivien the enchantress. The magic web—romantic love—of La Belle Dame sans Merci has held him in thrall, and now released, by Pippa's song, he is free—free to commit another murder, the killing of himself.

The failure of dialogue and true relationship between Sebald and Ottima is suggested throughout the episode by the fact that both consciously play roles: they speak to each other as they presume characters in those roles should speak. Then when Sebald is disillusioned in his part, he speaks not to Ottima but of her. “Speak to me—not of me!” she says more than once (1. 247, 250). Sebald's resort to monologue is but the final indication of the lack of dialogue in their relationship all along. Ultimately it is emblematic of an inner vacuity that demands role-playing.

Sebald, as I have said, conceives of himself as the Romantic Lover, with love as his religion and the Beloved as “my spirit's arbitress” (1. 219). When he fails to sustain that role, he is totally undone: his sense of self decomposes, as his final speech with its images of disintegrating consciousness indicates. The idea of God and of punishment of himself for God's sake is all he has to cling to. And this new idea gives him a new role—the Penitent and Punisher of Vice. Pippa's song, then, does not stimulate him to a love of God but to playing a new role that has no moral or religious content. I
know of no other work of such brevity that examines so fully and so well the psychology of romantic love.

In the second episode, "Noon," it is also a self-conceived role that prevents Jules from realization of a relationship of dialogue and interchange. Where Sebald had sought redemption in romantic love, Jules seeks it in art. He has a vision of himself as the artist in quest of ideal beauty, "the human Archetype" (2. 86). Having little hope of ever finding his ideal in real life, he has worshiped perfect works of art, like Canova's statue of Psyche. Then he discovers Phene, whom he perceives as the living embodiment of this ideal—a *tableau vivant*, as it were, of Canova's pure white marble form. Where previously he had lived in art, he would now make her his ground of being: "Nay, look ever / That one way till I change, grow you," he says; "I could / Change into you, beloved!" (2. 8–10). He would establish his selfhood by becoming Phene.

Jules's perception of Phene's splendid qualities of both body and soul is based on illusion. For Phene is not what she seems. Some of his fellow art students have played a cruel trick on him, writing beautiful letters to him in her name. Before they marry, Jules knows her only by sight and through the letters supposedly hers. He proposes marriage and Phene agrees, on the condition that there be no conversation between them till after the wedding ceremony. All is as in a play: everything is arranged, even the script, as we shall see, being written by someone else.

As the episode opens, Jules declares his eternal devotion and then proceeds to talk for 115 lines. Occasionally he interrupts himself to suggest that Phene speak, for the *first* time in his presence (2. 13, 24); but she has no chance to make a murmur because he will not hush up. This is the Nuptial Monologue (as he sees it), and it must proceed at a stately pace and touch on profound themes. Phene, however, is not loath to remain silent because she wishes to stay "where your voice has lifted me," transported by words "above the world" (2. 124, 129). She would, if she could, play the role that Jules has foisted on her and enjoy forever the words that he speaks, like the hero in a tragedy by Racine. For it is speech that sustains
the illusion, as Ottima, too, well knew. But now she must speak, and it is the words of others that she must repeat, doggerel which declares that Love has pitched his tent in the place of excrement.

Jules’s immediate inclination is to disavow Phene and seek revenge from the perpetrators of the malicious hoax. But then Pippa comes passing by, singing a song of a page’s love for a queen who lived in Asolo long age. And immediately Jules is moved to forgo revenge and to love Phene in a new way. This comes about through a strange application of Pippa’s song to himself. For the song of an inferior’s love for a great and scornful lady stimulates Jules to identify himself with the queen: “I find myself queen here it seems!” (2. 287). Why should one always play the page’s part? Having discovered Phene not perfect, he will mold her as he had shaped marble, “evoke a soul” from the raw materials that she presents: “This new soul is mine” (2. 299–300). He will, in other words, assume a new role, that of Pygmalion. He will take Phene off to “some unsuspected isle in far off seas” (2. 327) and, free from all corrupting societal influences, possess her utterly as he molds her anew. Once again, in a very brief space, Browning portrays the master-slave relationship that love can engender and sustain.

The failure of dialogue is, of course, emblematic of a general breakdown of human relationships in modern life. Jules, like Sebald, never transcends his own subjectivity; he sees the other simply as an object, an object to be possessed and used to confirm his sense of self. If upon first glance it seems that Jules and Ottima are cast (or cast themselves) in very different roles, the difference is more apparent than real. The fact is that the first two episodes are complementary, portraying contrasting panels of lovers using each other pretty much to the same effect. We see this in the way that the second episode picks up where the first left off. Sebald is dying at the end of the first, and the second begins with Jules saying, “Do not die, Phene.” Sebald is the “slave” who must be held in thrall by his queen, and Ottima is the queen who must rule; Jules is the “queen” who governs the “page,” and Phene is the willing subject. Both Ottima and Jules exert their dominion through
words, words that confirm themselves and their subjects in the roles in which they cast themselves. In both cases it is the drama of what they call love that provides them with, and indeed sanctions, their roles.

In the third episode, "Evening," we are presented with another kind of love, of parent and child, also characterized by a lack of dialogue. Luigi has made up his mind to play the role of Martyr in the fight for Italian freedom. His mother tries to dissuade him from carrying out his plan, but to no effect; for whatever reasonable objections she poses, he brushes them aside as though rational action were of no import, the emotion and the passionate intensity being all. Tell me, she says, what good the assassination of the Austrian emperor will do the Italian cause. But Luigi can give no answer because, like Sordello, he has not the foggiest idea about politics. Her words to him are like the wind, the imagery of which, along with the imagery of light, dominates the episode. He himself hears only echoes of his own voice (3. 1-15, 159).

Like the lovers in the preceding episodes, Luigi finds a lack of meaning in modern life; but where they turned to love and art for salvation, he flirts with the idea of political martyrdom. Ideally he would have lived in a time of queens and knights and heroes. But since he is confined to the colorless present, the assassination of the emperor is an action worthy of the heroic self he would be. And so he makes up a little drama and gives himself a starring role. He envisions himself in "handsome dress" for the occasion—"White satin here to set off my black hair"—and "in I shall march" straight past the guards: "I have rehearsed it all" (3. 104-11). And watching him in spirit will be the glorious company of political martyrs as he kills the tyrant and cries out, "Italy, Italy, my Italy! / You’re free, you’re free" (3. 120-21). No opera could be grander.

And then of course he will be captured and put to death. For the drama to be acted out rightly there must be no escape—"to wish that even would spoil all!" Yes, "the dying is best part of it" (3. 64-65). If there are crowns yet to be won in this late age, it will be through martyrdom for the cause of
country. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!* Love of mother country is surely nobler than love of one's own parent.

His mother, who is given no name and is referred to both by Luigi and the author by the name of her parental role, points out to him that this kind of patriotism is "the easiest virtue for a selfish man / To acquire" (3. 125–26). As she continues her attempt to dissuade him from this fatal undertaking, Pippa passes by singing of a good king of ages long ago who was preserved from attack by a python. Luigi applies the words to himself and, strangely enough, instead of deciding against the assassination, as the sense of Pippa's song would seem to suggest, rushes out bidding his mother, "Farewell, farewell—how could I stay?"

Luigi's misapplication of Pippa's song seems a little less peculiar when we recall that he is so swept up in his fancy of political martyrdom that everything he sees and hears not only reminds him of his proposed act but also confirms him in it. At the beginning of the episode, the echo in the turret seems to cry out the name of a leader of the revolt that established the Roman republic, the wallflowers overhead seem to be men and women urging the death of the emperor (3. 6–15). Moreover, his mother's mention of the morning star evokes this observation:

"I am the bright and morning-star," God saith—
And, "such an one I give the morning-star!"
The gift of the morning-star—have I God's gift
Of the morning-star?

(3. 148–51)

For one who can interpret natural phenomena in such a way, it is perhaps not so curious that he should misunderstand the import of Pippa's lyric. In short, Luigi is a monomaniac, a kind of Don Quixote who lives entirely in fancy and gives his life meaning by playing a role; and he disregards everything that does not minister to that mania.

The following episode, "Night," begins with the bishop saying, "I desire life now," in contrast to the conclusion of episode three, where Luigi wills his own death. Again there seems
to be a question of altruism—namely, the Monsignor’s gaining for the Church some of his family’s ill-gotten wealth. But unlike Luigi the Monsignor speaks coolly, with great self-possession. He knows who he is: he has his role as bishop and is confident in it. As Pippa says, he carries an “exalted air” (4. 275). The only “queen” he acknowledges is the Queen of Heaven (4. 109–10). He is, in brief, “the Monsignor,” who is given no name, only the title, while the intendant, a slippery fellow, is given not only a name but also many aliases.

So long as he is in control, he speaks easily, the way a bishop should. Yet from the beginning there is a slight suggestion that things are not quite right about this churchman. Being a Sicilian, he is not at home in northern Italy and thus suffers from even the mild weather of this first January day. He has a cough that interferes with conversation—“if my cough would but allow me to speak!” (4. 128–29). Even when he is in control of things, there is something slightly amiss. And then when he ceases to command the situation, he loses his self-possession entirely.

Although he has detained the intendant so as to converse with him, there is never any idea on the Monsignor’s part that there will be dialogue: he is master here! Indeed, if dialogue were to occur, the Monsignor would no longer be in control of the situation. If there are facts that Maffeo may wish to reveal, even these he knows already. The Monsignor believes that the Intendant has murdered his niece Felippa (Pippa) so that she could not inherit the family estate. “But I want you to confess quietly, and save me raising my voice,” he says. “Why, man, do I not know the old story?” The intendant had not, however, murdered the child at all but has saved her as a means of plaguing the Monsignor, who otherwise would receive the money for himself or the Church. “So old a story, and tell it no better?” he responds, even sarcastically repeating the bishop’s liturgical “howsoever, wheresoever, and whenssoever” of the previous speech. “Liar!” shouts the Monsignor, for the first time showing emotion (4. 165–79). He is now no longer the bishop but the pawn. Passively he listens to the intendant’s plans for doing away with Pippa, uttering no demur and seemingly offering assent (4. 205–9). Then Pippa passes by, singing
of an early appreciation of the music of nature and an imminent understanding of the harmony of the spheres when "suddenly God took me" (4. 233).

At this the Monsignor springs up and calls for his people in the outer hall. "Gag this villain," he says, to hush up unsettling words; "he dares—I know not half he dares—but remove him—quick." Just briefly before so suave and well-spoken, the Monsignor becomes inarticulate. He has almost ceased to be "the Monsignor," and now to recapture the role he must resort to the proper language of that role: "Misere mei, Domine! quick, I say!" The episode ends, like the one preceding, with Pippa's song serving to recall the hearer of it to a sense of personal identity with his chosen role.

In the end each of the protagonists in the four episodes is left alone with his self-conceived role. In the little dramas enacted, the speakers are never at a loss for words, employing language to satisfy their own psychological needs. Browning had already investigated this irony earlier, but what is new in *Pippa Passes* is that here Browning goes further to show that men also filter the language of others to fit their requirements; that is, they hear what they want to hear. We have already noted how each of the persons who acts on Pippa's lyrics either misinterprets them or wrenches and contorts them to make the words mean what they want them to mean. One of the basic themes of *Pippa Passes* is, then, the problem of interpretation of language.

Another theme, to which it is closely allied, is the problem of perspective. As Paracelsus observed, "We live and breathe deceiving and deceived" (*Paracelsus*, 4. 625), not only because we fit ourselves into categories but also because of the locus of our perception. Things are never as they seem. In *Pippa Passes* the characters in the four episodes are not the happy and enviable people whom the little girl from the silk mills would impersonate; all is not right with the world; Pippa has indeed "touched" many lives on this day which, at its close, she believes to have passed uneventfully; Pippa in fact is not a mere working girl but the heiress to a considerable fortune. Most appearances have no reality at all—and this not only because mankind are willfully purblind. The fact is that their
vision is necessarily bounded by their locations: various angles of vision yield varying reports of things observed. A work of perspectivist art like *Pippa Passes*, which employs points of view to transcend point of view, must therefore be ironic in mode and circular in structure.

We see this most clearly perhaps in the attitudes of the various characters concerning free will and determinism, to which, of course, the idea of enslavement is closely bound. Pippa thinks of herself in the main as determined, almost in the Marxist sense. She has but one free day a year, and so she must take full advantage of this day, which itself is partly determined and partly free:

```
Day, if I waste a wavelet of thee,
Aught of my twelve-hours' treasure—
One of thy gazes, one of thy glances,
(Grants thou art bound to, gifts above measure,)
One of thy choices, one of thy chances,
(Tasks God imposed thee, freaks at thy pleasure,)
Day, if I waste such labour or leisure
Shame betide Asolo, mischief to me!
```

(Intro., 13–20)

Others, however—"happy tribes"—are prepared to take or let pass indifferently what the day offers: "Day, 'tis but Pippa thou ill-usest / If thou prove sullen" (Intro., 30–31). This day can be of no great importance to Sebald, Jules, Luigi, or the Monsignor, for theirs is a different lot. God has so ordained it; men are but "God's puppets," working "but as God wills." And this is a consolation because "all service ranks the same with God" and hence "there is no last or first" (Intro., 190–95). The idea of fate and arbitrariness becomes a major theme of the poem and is closely connected with the concept of power that Browning had addressed himself to directly in *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*. As Pippa says, there is not "one deed / Power shall fall short in or exceed" (Intro., 200–201).

Pippa, who is to have such importance in the lives of a number of people, is portrayed, like one of the Fates, as engaged in "silk-winding, coil on coil" (Intro., 71). Sebald sees
himself caught in a web of Ottima’s hair (1. 247). Jules, finding himself the victim of an evil prank, believes that “all’s chance here” (2. 250). Bluphocks, the satanic figure always hovering in the background, adopts a philosophy of *carpe diem* because all is predestined, he (punningly) having “renounced all bishops save Bishop Beveridge,” the Calvinist divine. His other allusions are, moreover, mainly to determinism—for example, Rabelais’s Panurge consulting Hertrippa. When his mother urges him to mistrust his own sentiments, Luigi argues that “heaven / Accords with me,” that he has “God’s gift” (3. 73, 150). The Monsignor—“I, the bishop”—also holds that “my glory springs from another source” (4. 109–11).

The characters see themselves in terms of a power relationship, which the narrative underscores time and again. Let us note how everybody is subject to the domination of someone else: Pippa’s life is controlled by Luca, her employer; Luca has been killed by Sebald; Sebald is enslaved by his “queen,” Ottima; Phene is exploited by the students to get at Jules, who, the victim of his fellow art students, will nevertheless ‘mold’ Phene; Luigi is manipulated by political schemers; Bluphocks is paid by the intendant; the street girls are whores in the employ of Bluphocks; the intendant is at the mercy of the Monsignor, who almost becomes the intendant’s accomplice and thus subject to blackmail; the Monsignor is governed by the pope; Pippa is alive only because the intendant has plans to use her as an instrument against the Monsignor. Indeed there is a Chain of Being, but not the one Pippa sings of when she passes outside Ottima’s house. This is not a chain of love but a chain of power: everyone is the puppet of someone else. Hence, in a meaning quite opposite to that intended, Pippa’s final words are right: “All service is the same with God— / Whose puppets, best and worst, / Are we......”

What then are we to make of all this? Is it the final meaning of *Pippa Passes* that human beings are but the playthings of a God who uses them presumably only for his own amusement? The answer must be, as to like questions posed about *Sordello*, both yes and no. For here again we are dealing with a work of Romantic Irony that does not allow the signified to be the end of discourse. Hovering above the work there is the figure of
the poet, to whom the sense of the signified returns. Pippa unknowingly describes the process and indeed the whole structure of the poem when in the beginning she speaks of the sunbeam hitting the water in a basin: a splash breaks it up into bits that are sent "wheeling and counterwheeling, / Reeling crippled beyond healing" till they "grow together on the ceiling." How does this happen? "That will task your wits," demand exercise of the co-operating fancy in joining together the fragments supplied by the author. Meantime, "where settles himself the cripple?" (Intro., 77–82, 87).

Each of the four episodes is apparently a discrete entity, their only connection being Pippa, who is ignorant of the content of each and who touches each one in a very tangential but nonetheless important way. Between the episodes there are three interludes of "talk by the way," which is "by the way" only in the geographic sense. But there is upon nearer inspection a much closer relationship of the dramatic fragments than at first was evident. It is an interconnectedness not only of theme but also of imagery and circumstance, only a few of which I shall mention.

The ironically named heartsease that Pippa picks in Ottima's garden is set next to the lily in Pippa's room in the epilogue and is suggestive not only of the (unknown) richness of the day's adventures but also of how perception, understanding, is limited to a point of view. Pippa commands the lily to wake up and note how this new plant has a flower thrice as large, thrice as spotted, and containing thrice the pollen while the leaves and parts "that witness / The old proportions and their fitness / Here remain, unchanged, unmoved now." Suppose, she says, that there is a king of the flowers who holds "a girl-show" in his bowers:

"Look ye, buds, this growth of ours,"
Says he, "Zanze from the Brenta,
I have made her gorge polenta
Till both cheeks are near as bouncing
As her...name there's no pronouncing!
See this heightened colour too—
For she swilled Breganze wine
Till her nose turned deep carmine—
'Twas but white when wild she grew!
And only by this Zanze's eyes
Of which we could not change the size,
The magnitude of what's achieved
Elsewhere may be perceived!"

(4. 307–19)

The heartsease and the lily also contribute to the dominant imagery of the poem, the colors red and black or dark and light.

In somewhat similar fashion Jules’s new profession as a painter is alluded to by the Monsignor in the fourth episode. The murdered Luca is surely “That old...somebody I know” referred to by the third girl in “talk by the way” between episodes three and four (3. 233). Bluphocks is the author of the verse Phene recites, the informer on Luigi, the pimp of the three girls of the street, the would-be seducer of Pippa.” Similar imagery and circumstances are woven into the fabric of the poem.

In a number of ways, the structure of the poem calls attention to the work as an artifice. What could be more obviously artificial or contrived than the fact that Pippa just happens by at the crucial moment in the lives of eight people and that her singing, which they just happen to overhear, provokes four of them to action of greatest importance for their own lives and for the lives of the others? What could be more artificially circumstantial than that the intended victim of episode four is the one whose song stimulates one co-conspirator, who is also her uncle, to reverse his momentary inclination to permit her to be done away with?

The reasons for this, I think, are twofold, First, Browning is concerned to show that, whether we realize it or not, society is a fabric. As Dickens demonstrates in his novels, so much happens to us of which we are totally unaware, and yet these circumstances unbeknown to ourselves can be of tremendous significance to us personally and to society at large. From the social, moral standpoint we must make connections, engage in dialogue, join the radiant “cripples” into a healthy whole.
When, for instance, the poor girls of Asolo are unable to find work to feed and clothe themselves, they turn to prostitution and criminal intrigue. Love, to use Browning's term, demands that we be responsible. That is the moral import of the circular structure that encloses the society of Asolo on this New Year's Day pregnant with possibilities for good and thus shows that "all service ranks the same."

Secondly, Browning has the poem call attention to itself in order to show that any plan is but a convenience and a fiction. Although love may call for the making of connections, power does not permit us to know what connections to make, not least because we are not free to act as we would. In the case of Pippa, for example, she cannot know what is going on inside the buildings that she passes by nor can she have any idea as to the effect her songs will have. To blame Pippa for being other than poor Pippa, the little girl from the silk mills of Asolo, would be absurd, because given her circumstances she can be no other. And the same observation of the other characters in the poem may to a great degree likewise be aptly made. Men are indeed what Pippa calls them: God's puppets, caught in a cycle of recurrence, one year of toil following the next.

Which view is correct? Is man free or determined? The answer that *Pippa Passes* makes is both. And it is the ironic nature of the poem that allows the two views to be alike true. For only God can know whether men are puppets or not—and men, of course, can never get to know what God knows. As readers we have an overview of the events of this New Year's Day in Asolo—we have, as it were, the world in microcosm—and yet we ultimately know little more than any of the characters in the poem about God's ways. What more we do know is that, from the evidence of the poem itself, the ways of God are inscrutable and can be neither explained nor justified. That is the ironic import of the circular structure that shows that there is nothing more to be known. Not for nothing is the poem entitled *Pippa Passes*: like Pippa we pass unknowingly through most of life.

The Romantic Irony of *Pippa Passes* is thus more strongly pronounced than that of *Paracelsus*, *Strafford*, or even
Sordello. Where Paracelsus had Festus and Strafford had Lady Carlisle as chorus-figures to guide us and where Sordello had a narrator to speak on behalf of the protagonist, there is no guide at all to our interpretations of the actions of Pippa Passes. The author provides us with no more clues to right interpretation than God does for the inhabitants of Asolo on this New Year’s Day. Like them we have only the Janus face on this first day of January. Pippa Passes is, I believe, the only one of the longer works of Browning’s early career that metaphysically is characterized by an undefining irony.

Pippa is a highly experimental work, combining as it does the lyric, dramatic, and narrative modes in verse and prose. Unhampered by the demands of the stage, Browning was able to write a drama that allowed full play to his ironic imagination. A number of commentators have seen it mainly as a transitional work that looks back to the so-called lyricism of Pauline and Paracelsus and, in its concentration on the fragmentary scene, looks forward to the dramatic monologue. I myself see it as a further development of Paracelsus, which as we have noted is a series of lyric moments treated dramatically, and of Strafford, Browning’s first play and first dramatization of irony. It represents an advance on the two preceding works in that the moments are more fully concentrated and dramatized than in Paracelsus and the protagonists’ decisions to act in a certain way more clearly focused than in Strafford. Pippa Passes is a fully lyrical drama—that is, one in which the drama is brought into being by song, not only Pippa’s but also that of the other characters as well, who express themselves with lyrical intensity and thereby heighten their fears and longings that Pippa’s songs only further enhance and strengthen. It is song that evokes the crucial decision in each scene (the resulting action from which is not dramatized) and song that moves the narrative from morning to night.

Even though we are left with an undefining irony concerning the metaphysics of the poem, it is, I believe, nonetheless clear that insofar as Browning’s aesthetic position is concerned there is a definite meaning to be gained. For the poet has contrived his poem to show that ultimately poetry is a social enterprise. Poetry is power. It has an effect whether the poet
intends it or not. And though he sing to himself and be accidentally overheard, as Mill and other aesthetic theorists of the 1820s and 30s insisted he should be, he still through the power of his verse can move his audience, for good or ill—and for this he must take responsibility. He must also demonstrate that love which develops through dialogue. A lyric poet, in other words, must also be dramatic. Otherwise he remains, like Pippa, at a monologic remove from his listeners, exercising power over them but abnegating his obligation to love them and hence help them advance in the business of soul-making. There is more than one way to “touch” an audience.

The second number of Bells and Pomegranates was published in March 1842. It seems to have been conceived, and perhaps composed, almost five years earlier. Writing to Miss Haworth in August 1837, Browning said that he was about to begin completion of Sordello “and to begin thinking a Tragedy (an Historical one)" (Orr, Life, p. 103). This new play was almost certainly King Victor and King Charles, which Macready had in hand by 5 September 1839, when he recorded in his diary the following passage: “Read Browning's play on Victor, King of Sardinia—it turned out to be a great mistake. I called Browning into my room and most explicitly told him so" (Diaries, 2: 23). Although advertised at the end of the Sordello volume as being “Nearly Ready," it presumably was published subsequent to Pippa Passes, which apparently was written later, because he wished to put forward his best work as the first number of his new series.14

King Victor and King Charles bears close resemblance to Strafford. It also is a drama on a historical subject15 intended for stage production and concerned with the idea of kingship and the idealization of the man who is king. As we shall see, Charles holds the same illusion with respect to King Victor as Strafford does with respect to King Charles. It is, however, a less accessible play than Strafford: even more than Browning’s first drama, it is largely a matter of oration rather than action, of events alluded to instead of represented; and its basic themes are barely discoverable upon repeated rereading and would hardly be discernible at all from presentation in the the-
ater. Macready was right to term it a great mistake insofar as its suitability for the stage is concerned.

In structure it is different from Strafford, which follows the conventional five-act pattern established by the Elizabethans. King Victor and King Charles is in two divisions—"First Year, 1730.—King Victor" and "Second Year, 1731.—King Charles"—which are in turn divided into two parts. The parallel division of King Victor and King Charles is, however, to a certain degree reminiscent of the structure of Strafford, in which Browning used parallel scenes (the first two acts) and parallel acts (three and four). But where the structure of Strafford properly suggests that the two parties and indeed the two chief politicians are on the same level, the parallel structure of King Victor and King Charles does not accurately reflect the content of the drama. For it is not the aim of the play to show that Victor and Charles are to be judged equally: Victor is nothing less than the villain of the piece, whereas Charles, though seriously flawed, elicits our sympathy and, whether heroic or not, is clearly preferable to Victor. Yet the structure suggests that we should view the two kings as though, to paraphrase Thirlwall's words quoted earlier, they were two contending parties with good and evil so intermixed that we are compelled to give each an equal share of sympathy.

Part one of "King Victor" ends with Charles in despair because he believes his father is about to force him to resign his claim to the throne, and with his reliance on his wife Polyxena. Part two shows Charles not deposed but crowned as king and Charles's turning away from Polyxena, who sees through the old king's ruse to retire and then reappear to reclaim the throne when Charles will have solved certain problems. The first part of "King Charles" depicts the return of Victor and the refusal of Charles to yield the crown. Part two deals with Charles's giving the crown to his father without a struggle and with the reunion of feeling between Charles and Polyxena when Charles admits that he too saw through his father's trick. The play ends with the death of Victor, presumably from an access of sentiment too strong for his old heart, when he learns that Charles is not to insist on keeping the crown as he had feared. King Victor and King Charles is thus
made up of a series of reversals that, quite contrary to expecta-
tion, lead to the typical ending of early Victorian domestic
drama—the husband and wife fully rejoined as one and the
father and the son reconciled at the moment of death. It is as
though Browning wished to carry further the ironic aims of
Strafford but retreated almost at the last moment, presumably
for the sake of success in the theater, to bring his work to a
close with a situation more properly suited to a play by Bulwer
or Knowles.

Like Strafford—and Pippa Passes too, as we have just
noted—King Victor and King Charles portrays the ironies of
love and to a certain extent explores the dialectic of love and
power examined in Sordello. As the play opens, Charles
expresses his need for Polyxena in his uncertain situation.
Although the crown prince, he is treated contemptuously by
his father, the prime minister, and the king’s mistress. What
bothers him most, however, is not his mistreatment but the
fact that he does not enjoy his father’s love. He insists on
retelling Polyxena the whole story, apparently for the hun-
dredth time, as she keeps saying, “You have told me,” “I
know.” His parents (his mother has since died) openly dis-
cussed his “insignificance” in front of him, but he bore all
because “Victor was my father in spite of that” (1.1.59, 63).
So he suffered, but less, because he was soon married to
Polyxena, who served partially to take the place of his father.

During the interview when Victor reveals that he is abdica-
ting, Charles rehearses how in the past he has borne his father’s
hate and insults but now in resigning the throne, “you insult
yourself, and I remember / What I believed you, what you
really are / And cannot bear it” (1.2.170–73). Charles cannot
conceive of his father other than in a position of power and of
himself as other than subordinate.

It is an ideal of his father as the embodiment of power that
exercises such control over the son. Being weak himself, he
idolizes the strong. It is something resembling his father’s
strength that draws him to Polyxena, who Charles believes
could be king more easily than he (1.1.140–44), and upon
whose strength he depends for support (1.1.175–78). She in
fact tells him how he must act (1.1.157, 289), and so depen-
dent is he upon her that he is fearful of taking any action without her direction. She is his "queen," as was Ottima to Sebald.

Although loath to accept the crown and thus ostensibly be placed in a more powerful position than his father, Charles finally does so when his father commands it. Charles well knows that Victor is engaging in a charade. But he does not give voice to this; instead he turns away from his wife at the end of "King Victor" when she begs Victor to retake the crown now rather than later. Dismissing all suggestions of trickery, Charles will guard his ideal of his father.18

Charles surprisingly proves a good and efficient ruler. Even D'Ormea, the prime minister inherited from Victor, is won over from political chicanery to true statesmanship by his monarch's example. Charles does it all, however, mainly for his father's benefit—that is, to clear Victor's name from obloquy (2.1.55–67). No sooner does he redress his people's grievances and appease justly angered Spain and Austria than he is presented with the news that Victor is returning to reclaim the throne. Although D'Ormea has good evidence of Victor's intentions, Charles categorically refuses to believe it and charges his minister with misbehavior for his own ends. In addition, Charles turns pleadingly to his wife to ask that she also refute the charges against Victor (2.1.136–40). Charles can deal only with those, including his wife, who support him in his illusion concerning his father.

Only when Charles is willing to confess that it is his father's power and not his love for the man—which, to be sure, he had identified with power—that compels him is he able to face up to the truth of what his father is—"One that's false—/False—from the head's crown to the foot's sole, false!" Victor returns to take the throne not out of any regard for his people but for the sake of power, to undo all Charles's good works, "restore the past—prevent the future" (2.2.226–32). But if he has to suffer defeat, Charles says, "The best is that I knew it in my heart / From the beginning, and expected this, / And hated you, Polyxena, because you saw thro' him . . . " (2.2.233–35). It was only a willed delusion all along: his father did
not and does not love him; and he has hated anyone who wished to dispel the illusion.

It is at this point apparent, if indeed it has not been for some time, that Browning's main interest in the play is the psychological examination of Charles's character. Charles is revealed as one who, deprived of parental love from early youth, will do anything to win his father's approval. Weak himself, he loves his father's power: "What would I give for one imperious tone / Of the old sort!" (2. 1. 235-36). Yet it seems that Browning's root conception of the drama was of the conflict between love and duty, and only with great difficulty does he manage to point this up in the closing moments of the play. Were the manuscript extant and were we able to examine it, I think it would show Browning at some pains to force the work into shape. It was, after all, almost five years between conception and publication of the play.

The conflict between love and duty is highlighted in Polyxena's admonition to Charles, whom in an oration of twenty-seven lines she addresses not as her husband but as king:

King Charles? Pause you upon this strip of time
Allotted you out of eternity!
Crowns are from God—in his name you hold yours.
Your life's no least thing, were it fit your life
Should be adjured along with rule; but now,
Keep both! Your duty is to live and rule—
You, who would vulgarly look fine enough
In the world's eye deserting your soul's charge—
Ay, you would have men's tongues—this Rivoli
Would be illumined—while, as 'tis, no doubt,
Something of stain will ever rest on you—
No one will rightly know why you refused
To abdicate—they'll talk of deeds you could
Have done, no doubt,—nor do I much expect
Future achievements will blot out the past,
Envelop it in haze—nor shall we two
Be happy any more; 'twill be, I feel,
Only in moments that the duty's seen
As palpably as now—the months, the years
Of painful indistinctness are to come—
While daily must we tread the palace rooms
Pregnant with memories of the past—your eye
May turn to mine and find no comfort there
Through fancies that beset me as yourself—
Of other courses with far other issues
We might have taken this great night—such bear
As I will bear! What matters happiness?
Duty! There's man's one moment—this is yours!

(2. 2. 253–80)

The speech is excellent in its austere dignity, but it seems better suited to French neoclassical tragedy than to King Victor and King Charles, to Polyeucte than to Polyxena. In addition, it does not make much sense. Why should Charles be blamed for keeping the crown and praised for abdicating? No sensible citizen of Savoy or Sardinia would be so inclined to blame or praise. As it turns out, all ends well so that Charles can have his crown and wear it too. For he gives the crown to his father, who thereupon promptly dies and Charles remains king. The conflict between love and duty is at an end, made possible, as it were, by a miracle. The father now dead (or dying), Charles and Polyxena are reunited not only as husband and wife but as king and queen.

In looking at the defects of the play, I do not wish to overlook some of the ironies prevalent in the previous three published works. There is not only the ironic structure but also the irony induced of self-consciousness that causes the characters to feel that they are actors in a play. As a youth Charles lives a pleasantly secluded life. If he peered out from his curtained box to look at his father and brother on the world's great stage, he was filled with pride to see them play their heroic parts before he "let the curtain drop" (1. 1. 22–28). Upon the death of his brother, he himself is forced to play a part on life's stage: "the young Prince" who serves as "the old King's foil" (1. 1. 119). To help him in his new role of crown prince, Polyxena coaches him in his part. During a rehearsal she seeks to embolden him by saying, "I fancied while you spoke / Some
tones were just your father's" (1. 1. 129–30). Then she goes on to give him direction for playing a certain scene:

    you've mastered
    The fief-speech thoroughly—this other, mind,
    Is an opinion you deliver,—stay,
    Best read it slowly over once to me;
    Read—there's bare time; you read it firmly—loud
    —Rather loud—looking in his face,—don't sink
    Your eye once—ay, thus! "If Spain claims."
    —Just as you look at me!

    (1. 1. 332–39)

Polyxena more or less directs him how to act in every situation. Charles in turn becomes so dependent upon her direction that before he can speak he must rehearse before her what he is to say: "I'll seek him," he says about a proposed interview with his father, "or, suppose / You hear first how I mean to speak my mind? / —Loudly and firmly both, this time, be sure!" (1. 1. 308–10).

Victor is also very much aware of playing a role. He sees the abdication, for example, as a theatrical exercise to be carefully acted (1. 2. 41–46). As for Charles he will suit the role Victor has chosen for him: the "earnest tone—your truth now, for effect! / It answers every purpose: with that look— / That voice," the only thing to be guarded against being Charles's possible "child's play" (1. 2. 230–33, 247). But, D'Ormea asks, if Charles is to be cast as "King Charles," "What then may you be?" Victor replies that he will be "Count Remont— / Count Tende—any little place's count" (1. 2. 252–57).

After his retirement and subsequent return, Victor sees the events about to unfold as in a play: "the masque unmasque / Of the King, crownless, grey hairs and hot blood,— / The young King, crowned, but calm before his time" (2. 1. 181–83). Or he thinks of himself in another dramatic situation, dying in battle:

    I, Victor,
    Sole to have stood up to France—bent down
By inches, brazed to pieces finally
By some vast unimaginable charge.

(2. 1. 205–8)

His life's drama must come to the proper end: "What wants my story of completion?" (2. 2. 320). Finally, when Charles gives him back his crown, Victor struggles to enact his role correctly: "I seek for phrases / To vindicate my right"—"I am then King!" (2. 2. 310–11, 316). He is again the absolute monarch like King Louis of France: "How the world talks already of us two" (2. 2. 357). And so assured of heroic "completion," he can have his life's drama end.

Charles meanwhile has been playing the role of king, having seen through his father's design but pretending not to. At the end Polyxena tells Victor:

Charles
Has never ceased to be your subject, sire—
. . . he acted you—
Ne'er for an instant did I think it real.

Only with the death of his father can Charles be indeed King Charles.

Envisioning themselves in heroic roles and portrayed as the abstractions Power, Love, and Duty, the three major characters are almost totally wooden. Only D'Ormea has any vitality; he is a welcome but anomalous character in this "tragedy," as Browning called it in the Advertisement to the play. D'Ormea is the spirit ironic who looks with a certain detachment on himself as well as on others. Because he does not enjoy Charles's trust, D'Ormea offers his badge of office to the young king several times, only to have it returned to him: "I see / I never am to die a martyr!" (2. 1. 406–7), he says self-mockingly. Once, however, when Charles demands that he prove his charges against Victor or suffer imprisonment, D'Ormea says, presumably to himself: "And I'm at length / A martyr for the truth! No end, they say, / Of miracles. My conscious innocence!" (2. 1. 142–44). If others play roles, why can't he? Far from being the devil, he is a kind of guardian
sprite whom the virtuous can never understand. "Motives, seek / You virtuous people, motives," he says to Polyxena. "Say, I serve / God at the devil's bidding—will that do?" (2.1. 13–15). Possessed of a sense of irony, he realizes that no matter how long a matter may be considered one can never know with positive assurance that he is following the way of God or the way of Satan when he finally decides on a certain course.

\[\text{King Victor and King Charles}\] is, as DeVane noted a quarter of a century ago, probably the most neglected of all Browning's works (\textit{Handbook}, p. 101); this is probably still true today. The poet himself regarded it as "a very indifferent substitute" for another play that he had planned to publish as the second number of \textit{Bells and Pomegranates} and anticipated that its success would be "problematic enough" (\textit{New Letters}, p. 25). There remains no reason to value it more highly than did the author himself. One can only be amazed that it stands, in order of publication, between \textit{Pippa Passes} and \textit{Dramatic Lyrics}. 