CHAPTER VIII

DRAMATIC ROMANCES AND LYRICS

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER THE PUBLICATION OF Colombe’s Birthday, Browning wrote to his friend Domett enclosing a copy of his play: “I feel myself so much stronger, if flattery not deceive, that I shall stop some things that were meant to follow, and begin again” (Domett, p. 106). The things meant to follow seem to have been plays, for although two more were soon to be published, neither was intended for stage production. Beginning again apparently meant returning to shorter pieces of the kind that had appeared in Dramatic Lyrics three years earlier. Yet before he could begin—“I really seem to have something fresh to say”—Browning felt himself in need of a change, a trip to southern Italy to complement his visit in 1838 to northern Italy, where he had found artistic renewal. After which, “I never took so earnestly to the craft as I think I shall—or may, for these things are with God” (Domett, p. 106).

The second journey to Italy made between August and December 1844, proved remarkably fruitful. He not only wrote verse on the way there and back but also was inspired by Italian scenes to compose a number of poems upon his return. Again in England, he began correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett in January 1845 and finally met her in person some four months later. She too may have inspired some of the short poems that Browning now wrote. She did, at any rate, see a number of them in manuscript and in page proof and made suggestions for changes in them.1 The verses were published as Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, the seventh number of Bells and Pomegranates, in November 1845.

As he was completing Colombe’s Birthday, Browning seems to have discovered that ironic romance was a more salutary mode for him than tragedy, certainly as far as playwriting was concerned. Dramatic Lyrics of 1842 had proved, in the words of John Forster in the Examiner for 26 November 1842, a
“continued advance in the right direction”—lyrics for the most part dramatic that are “full of the quick turns of feelings, the local truth, and the picturesque force of expression, which the stage so much delights in” and that redeem his genius from “mere metaphysical abstraction.” Where Browning excelled, said Richard Hengist Horne, was in “dramatic portraiture.”

By 1844 Browning could have had no doubt that his genius was essentially ironic. For some years now he had been forcing his native gift into literary forms alien to it—namely, the dramatic tragedy, basically a closed-end form that gravitates toward judgment in favor of one particular side of a dilemma. Browning had struggled mightily with the form, attempting to provide it with the multiple perspectives, even in its closure, that his genius dictated. But it was all wrong, for only with the greatest wrenching of the plot could he force it to yield the ironic possibilities of character portrayal—“dramatic portraiture”—that he found most congenial. Writing for the stage would simply no longer do. As he told Elizabeth Barrett, he would compose no more plays after the one he was currently working on (Kintner, 1:26).

We have already noted how the dramatic monologue—what Browning called the dramatic lyric—is a salutary form for an author who hangs between immanence and transcendence, involvement and detachment, the lyric and the dramatic. We have also noted how those dramatic lyrics in which an ironic conflict is most strongly felt are those that realize most fully the potentialities of the form. But what of poems in which ironic tensions are significantly diminished, as for example in those works where the conflict between love and power is concluded by the choosing of one and the suppression (or forgetting) of the other? We have seen in Colombe's Birthday how Valence and Colombe choose love and Berthold chooses power and how their decisions force the play into the mold of ironic romance. Shorter forms dealing with such subject matter would then also be romances. Irony would not cease to inform poems of this nature, but ironic tensions would be reduced. As a result the emphasis would lie more heavily on narrative than on revelation of character. Browning decided therefore to call such poems dramatic romances. One cannot be sure exactly
which of the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* the poet had in mind as romances. In the edition of 1863, at any rate, six of the poems of this volume come under the head of "Dramatic Romances."³

Like *Dramatic Lyrics* this collection covers a wide range of subjects treated from many different points of view and expressed in highly varying meters and line lengths. Here as in the earlier volume, some of the poems were published under titles by which they are no longer known. The contents were as follows:

“How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix.”
(16—.)
Pictor Ignotus. Florence, 16—.
Italy in England [later called “The Italian in England”]
England in Italy. (Piano di Sorrento.) [later called “The Englishman in Italy”]
The Lost Leader
The Lost Mistress
Home Thoughts, from Abroad
The Tomb at St. Praxed’s (Rome, 15—.) [later called “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church”]
Garden Fancies
  I. The Flower’s Name
  II. Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis
France and Spain
  I. The Laboratory (Ancien Regime.)
  II. Spain—The Confessional
The Flight of the Duchess
Earth’s Immortalities
Song [“Nay, but you, who do not love her”]
The Boy and the Angel
Night and Morning
  I. Night [later called “Meeting at Night”]
  II. Morning [later called “Parting at Morning”]
Claret and Tokay [later called “Nationality in Drinks”]
Saul [the first nine sections only, at the end of which is printed “(End of Part the First.)”]
Time’s Revenges
The Glove (Peter Ronsard loquitur)

It will be noted that a number of these poems are complementary but, with the exception of three instances, are not, as in Dramatic Lyrics, given joint titles. Why this should be so is unclear. It may be that Browning no longer felt the need to emphasize the dramatic (as opposed to the personal) nature of the verses; it may be that he felt the yoking under one title to be too obvious. But the fact remains that several of the poems are related and are enhanced, as I propose to demonstrate, by being considered together. Indeed, all the poems gain from examination of them as related pieces having a common theme, which more often than not is expressed ironically.

Like Dramatic Lyrics the volume begins with a lyric narrative of adventure in war and on horseback. The anapestic lines of “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” carry us with the rider on an urgent journey to bring the news that alone could save Aix. The poem has an unusual perspective in that the narrator makes his horse, Roland, and not himself the protagonist of the story, this being emphasized by the meter that almost suggests that the tale is being told from the horse’s point of view. In the end all the narrator remembers is the last of the town’s wine being poured down the horse’s throat, “which / Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.” In the end, in fact, Roland becomes the hero—not “which” but “who” brought the goods news to Aix.

“How They Brought the Good News” was eventually classified as a dramatic lyric. We might even call it a low-level dramatic monologue in that the selfless character of the speaker in this instance is obliquely revealed by what he says. But the romance quality of the poem is evident in the narrative, which stresses not the result but the process. Thus the narrator remembers every detail of his journey—the departure, what his
fellows said, what the landscape was like, what he wore—but of his goal he can remember nothing save the state of his horse, the means by which the journey was made.

Loyal praise of a brave animal is inverted in the next poem to self-praise, at least self-defense, by a cowardly painter—not how he triumphed but why I failed. "Pictor Ignotus" is the monologue of an unknown painter of the Florentine High Renaissance who explains why he has not achieved the fame of the youth, presumably Raphael, who seems everywhere to be praised. He could have done all the youth had done: he had the necessary talent and insight, nothing barred his way. Yet a voice spoke forbidding him to paint for the kind of worldly collector portrayed in "My Last Duchess." If then he is bested and his pictures die because he has shrunk from the new naturalism now fashionable, at least he has been able to dictate the terms of his defeat, having consciously and determinedly chosen to paint in the old style and thereby keep his art unsullied by the marketplace.

On first hearing, the apologia sounds convincing enough. We are in fact impressed by the artist who turns from the materialism of the Medicis and preserves a religious concern for his art. If there is a note of self-pity in his plea, it serves all the more to elicit our sympathy for this man of enormous potential but limited achievement. Yet on reflection we begin to wonder about two matters—namely, was he as talented as he says, and whose was the voice deflecting him from the fame he wished? In other words, judgment sets in when sympathy of the moment fades.

Claiming a God-given ability to perceive truth in the heavens, on the earth, and in man, he also makes pretense to the talent that would permit him to translate this truth to canvas, showing

Each face obedient to its passion's law,
Each passion clear proclaimed without a tongue;
Whether Hope rose at once in all the blood,
A-tiptoe for the blessing of embrace,
Or Rapture drooped the eyes as when her brood
Pull down the nesting dove's heart to its place,
Or Confidence lit swift the forehead up,  
And locked the mouth fast, like a castle braved.

We know from his descriptions that he would be showing these not embodied in real men and women but as personified abstractions in stylized form. And he too half faces up to his limitations when he asks, in the very next lines, “Men, women, children, hath it spilt, my cup? / What did ye give me that I have not saved?” The questions are not answered, but we see from the metaphor that whatever artistic gifts he possesses he has hoarded without ever expending them in art.

He has dreamed of fame, of sending his pictures forth “through old streets named afresh” in honor of him, and then in death would “not go to heaven, but linger here,” on earth. The thought was thrilling; but then it grew frightful, “’tis so wildly dear!” The expenditure of psychic energy would be simply too great: it would mean nothing less than becoming a new man, undergoing a rebirth. And is it worth it, after all? No, for “a voice changed it,” this aspiration. The speaker does not tell us who spoke. He does not tell us for the very reason that he does not know. If he knew, then he could blame someone for his failure, and no apology to himself or to anybody else would be necessary. But he cannot seriously consider that the voice is his own because to do so would be tantamount to admitting to inadequacy.

Like so many of Browning’s characters whom we have noticed, the painter attributes his limitations to fate, which in effect is the voice’s authority. He was like a man looking through a door to the revels inside, the revels “of some strange House of Idols at its rites.” Suddenly the world was changed for him. But he was afraid of what he saw, even afraid of himself. “Who summoned these cold faces which began / To press on me and judge me?” To enter would mean turning his back on the kind of art that he had perfected, doing violence to it and to himself. “They drew me forth,” but “spite of me,” like a nun “shrinking from the soldiery.” Then the voice spoke and he went no farther. Fate intervened just in time. He can therefore urge that he did not transgress his own moral destiny: “they” drew him forth in spite of himself.
He and his pictures have been spared the “daily pettiness” of the collector who might purchase “our” work. Other artists may be willing to suffer the inanity of the material-minded virtuosos concerning “our pictures,” but as for himself, “I chose my portion.” If he is an unknown painter, it is because he has wanted to remain so. Fate, in the form of limitation of either skill or vision, has not barred the way; the responsibility, he says in a gesture of pride, is totally his: he has determined his own defeat.

The note of bravery wavers however: his heart “sinks” as he goes about his ordinary, “monotonous” business of painting the “endless cloisters and eternal aisles” with the “same” series of religious figures, all with “the same cold, calm, beautiful regard.” In the end he poses as the pathetic but brave little soul who has consciously elected obscurity for himself and his art out of the highest principle. He knows his pictures will die, blackening and mouldering in the silence of the shrine, but at least he and they will be spared the merchant’s traffic. Finally, he asks, is fame worth the debasement of principle and purity?

Throughout the monologue there are images of expansion and contraction, of blazing light and darkness, of expenditure and hoarding. Even the pictures he would paint reveal the same imagery: Hope rising to be embraced, Rapture drooping the eyes as when her brood pulls down the heart to its place, Confidence lighting up the forehead and locking the mouth. He paints, in other words, images of his own inhibiting will. Clearly every leaping up of his heart is checked by timidity and fear. Like his spiritual brother J. Alfred Prufrock, the unknown painter always settles down on the side of parsimony: “it” would not be worth the expenditure; the expense of spirit, whether in love or art, is lust in action.

The design of “Pictor Ignotus” is much like that of “My Last Duchess.” The speaker inadvertently reveals his character by his utterance, which in this case is, as it is partially in the case of the earlier poem, a defense of, and apology for, himself. Where in the earlier monologue Browning employed rhymed couplets for a certain effect, he here uses alternative rhyme—abab, bcbc etc.—to suggest enclosure. Likewise, at the conclusion of the monologue, he introduces a further ironic
note in a passage that epitomizes the speaker. Where the duke referred to Neptune taming a sea-horse, Pictor Ignotus asks: 
"Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry? / Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth?" These are of course the old Romantic questions: Is not the idea profaned when expressed in the imperfect medium of language? Is not the thought debased when translated into action? But here the questions, which the speaker intends as images of empty fame, are ironically expressed, as Herbert Tucker suggests, in images of prophetic creativity. Gabriel's trumpet awakens the dead to new life; Shelley's west wind is to be a trumpet of prophecy. Moses strikes the rock to bring forth water from the earth; Browning himself uses the story in book three of Sordello to speak of the water of life that the multitude praises as dim oozings. By such means the poet himself intrudes, as it were, into his poem, to comment upon his creation, to make himself known, and to remind us that the monologue, for all its verisimilitude, is after all not life but art.

The same imagery of expansion and contraction is likewise used in the next two poems to yield an ironic effect. The first of the companion poems, "Italy in England," is the monologue of an Italian patriot now in exile in England recounting how a loyal contadina helped him escape the Austrian police. For three days he had been hiding in a recessed aqueduct, when he managed to attract the attention of a girl passing by. He was going to lie to her concerning why he was there; but finding her so artless he tells her the truth, asks for food and drink, and requests her to carry a message into Padua. She does all this and thereby helps him elude capture. Now, safely in England, he looks back over his last days in Italy long ago, and in doing so reveals how the intervening years have taken their toll of his youthful fervor and openness to spontaneous emotion.

During his long exile the monologist has become a professional patriot, so to speak, doing all those things, like raising money and eliciting statements of support, necessary for his cause. But in the process he has become a monomanic, has little "thought / Concerning—much less wished for—aught / Beside the good of Italy / For which I live and mean to die!" He is, in effect, dead to all save The Cause. He knows this.
although he does not put it in exactly those terms and rationalizes it as the price one pays for such patriotism. Yet looking back over those few days just before he left Italy for good, he experiences something of the old emotion. For thinking what he might possibly wish for, if he pleased to spend three wishes on himself, he still turns to matters connected with The Cause for the first two, both of which, not unexpectedly, issue from hate: the bloody murder of Metternich and the slow death from a broken heart of his old friend Charles, who deserted The Cause. As for the third, he wishes to see the girl who rescued him, now grown into a married woman with children:

know if yet that woman smiles
With the calm smile—some little farm
She lives in there, no doubt—what harm
If I sat on the door-side bench,
And, while her spindle made a trench
Fantastically in the dust,
Inquired of all her fortunes—just
Her children's ages and their names,
And what may be the husband's aims
For each of them—I'd talk this out,
And sit there, for an hour about,
Then kiss her hand once more, and lay
Mine on her head, and go my way.

Instead of such natural but homely joys that love can bring, he was wedded The Cause, which has sapped his soul's energy and made him dead to all natural joy. For an instant he is almost willing to admit that he wishes his life had been otherwise, but then the mania returns and in an *envoi* he says: "So much for idle wishing—how / It steals the time! To business now!"

Like Pictor Ignotus, the Italian in England refuses spiritual rebirth out of a mistaken sense of loyalty. And, as in the preceding monologue, Browning enters the poem, disguisedly, to try to make certain that we do not overlook what he intends. He does so here by infusing the poem with imagery of rebirth.
The story takes place during Holy Week. The speaker is a man with a price on his head and has a friend who betrays him. The girl comes to him in his "crypt." He pictures her as Mary is frequently represented iconographically, her foot on a snake, and he asks her to be the mediatrix between himself and the help he seeks in the Duomo, where as a type of Our Lady of Peace she is to ask "whence comes peace?" to which she may expect the reply "From Christ and Freedom." At the end of seven days—that is, on Easter—help comes through her aid and he rises from his hiding place and departs from Italy by sea. There is never any hint of passionate love between the two, only selfless devotion on her part to a man in need and, on the part of both, to a common cause. "I could not choose," says the speaker, "But kiss her hand and lay my own / Upon her head," the same gestures he would make again were his third wish granted. By his imagery Browning would have us see that the possibility of rebirth still remains: what is necessary is that the patriot for a while forgo his "business" in favor of more ordinary and purely human relationships. The poem depicts concisely the monomania and the bitterness of long political exile.

The companion monologue, "England in Italy," suffers from lengthiness and from the poet's lack of a clear conception of what he wanted it to be. Apparently Browning originally intended it as a description of the landscape around Naples, but then he added an ending concerning the Corn Laws, probably for two reasons: to give it a political slant so that it could more properly serve as a pendant to "Italy in England" and, secondly, to give the discursive stanzas a more pointed ending. Elizabeth Barrett wrote to the poet, after having seen first the manuscript and then the printer's proofs, that the ending "gives unity to the whole just what the poem wanted" (Kintner, 1:244).

The monologue is addressed to a small peasant girl frightened by the scirocco that has brought a storm of rain. The Englishman tries to comfort her by describing his impressions of the past day: the dryness, the churning seas, the flapping birdnets, the wine-making, his ascent of a mountain to view the sea below and the clear sky above—all images suggestive
of death and rebirth and clearer vision. The wind has now come, the storm has passed, the festive celebration will soon begin. All this is described in 285 lines, at which point the speaker says, doubtless sensing the child's boredom, "Such trifles' you say?" On this very day in England, Parliament is debating the Corn Laws, whether abolishing them be "righteous and wise." Why, they might just as well debate whether the scirocco should vanish in black from the skies!

The sentiment is noble, and the poem has been read as expressive of Browning's own political liberalism. If it is no more than that—description of Neapolitan landscape followed by an ejaculation of political liberalism—then it can make no claim to being a dramatic monologue. We must, however, recall that the poem is presumably intended as a companion to "Italy in England" and that we are expected to note certain similarities. This means that, at the very least, we must suspect an ironic intent. When we look carefully, we are puzzled by the speaker's claim to share Ulysses' secret: "He heard and he knew this life's secret / I hear and I know!" (227-28). Whatever the secret is—apparently it is that men should be free—the monologuist does little to help others realize it. Unlike the Italian in England, he is not forced into exile; on the contrary, he is a tourist fascinated by the quaint ways of Italian life and the oddity of the landscape. While "in my England at home, / Men meet gravely to-day" to debate the Corn Laws, he amuses himself with the "sensual and timorous beauty" (195) of southern Italy. Where the Italian exile has his country's freedom as his "business," the English tourist can give but a passing mention—and this to a child—of the most serious cause of starvation in England during the "hungry forties." The echo of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" that Browning so strongly intended is purely for ironic effect.

Loyalty to a cause is more forcefully the informing idea of the following poem, "The Lost Leader." The poet who was once in the glorious company of Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, and Shelley has broken from the vanguard and the freemen to sink to the rear and the slaves, although in the eyes of the world he is up front in the limelight for all to see. The apostate has gone and will never be welcomed back, being a "lost soul,"
the most serious charge Browning can make against anyone. But this Judas is lost only as a leader; his accomplished work remains and entitles him to be "pardoned in Heaven, the first by the throne!" It is not, I believe, so much Browning's devotion to the poetry of Wordsworth (who so obviously is the Lost Leader) as his sense of irony that dictates the final turn in the poem.

"The Lost Mistress" is artificially linked to its companion by the adjective in the title. In tone it is entirely different. Where the speaker of the former poem was more than ready to shout invective and heap opprobrium upon the disloyal leader, the speaker of the second is more than gentle, making no charge against his unfaithful lady love. "The Lost Mistress" is a more interesting poem dramatically than its companion because here the speaker has a design upon his auditor, which is to elicit pity and show himself as the manly knight of infinite resignation. "All's over then. ?" he asks. Surely this can hardly be, for his mistress's words of dismissal sound no bitterer than the sparrows' good-night twitter. Surely her farewell is but a signal for a slight transition in their relationship. She will not really send him away? He will appear as no more than a friend, claiming but ever so slightly more than mere friendship entitles him to.

We cannot know how the mistress interprets his pretty little speech, but we see that he enjoys his status as the rejected lover. In the first place, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all because in being the loser there are certain claims to distinction. In the second place, he enjoys playing the role of the martyr, enjoys abasing himself, enjoys the revel in self-pity: "Mere friends are we,—well, friends the merest / Keep much that I'll resign." The monologue is only twenty lines long but it manages to reveal the character of a rejected suitor who makes every effort to present himself in the most favorable light, to his auditor and to himself, as infinitely injured but eternally faithful. It is a sort of preliminary sketch of "Andrea del Sarto."

Loyalty of another kind is the theme of "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad," which was originally composed of three separate lyrics instead of the two that we now know. The beauties
praised in “Oh, to be in England” are those quiet ones alluded to in the “The Lost Mistress.” We have often noted, from Paracelsus onward, how for Browning the present moment takes on meaning only when viewed in terms of the future, as being ever in the process of becoming. We may note the same in this lyric.

Oh, to be in England
Now that April’s there,
And who wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brush-wood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

The “some morning” turns out to be “now,” and the lines that were growing longer under the promise of a future morning end in a final “In England—now,” the shortest line of the strophe.

For most poets these beautiful lines would be poem enough. For Browning, however, they must be redeemed from their April nowness by the coming May. Or to put it another way, the lyric moment is to be incorporated into a dramatic movement.

And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows—
Hark! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray’s edge—
That’s the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields are rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children’s dower,
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!
The April-becoming-May is a month of rapid movement. Where the boughs and sheaf are in tiny leaf in the first strophe, the pear tree leans and scatters. Where April's chaff-finch sings, the thrush of anticipated May sings his song twice over. Like the bird the poet of this lyric sings twice over so as to recapture the first moment, to bind his days together, to redeem the past from its pastness, to put futurity into the present. All will be gay when April becomes May. And because April possesses this quality of becoming, the flowers of the future-in-the-present are far brighter than this southern gaudy melon-flower here and now. It is not that we pine for what is not or that unheard melodies are sweeter than tonal ditties—attitudes of Romantic poets; rather, it is the pregnancy of the present that makes it meaningful. This is why the English April landscape of dainty, quiet beauties about to be the blossoms of May makes dull by comparison the gaudy beauties of the south, which, in this spring month, are already full-blown.

The second lyric of "Home-Thoughts"—"Here's to Nelson's memory!"—is a drinking song that sounds more like Thomas Hood than Browning and that the poet may have included so as to give his volume a certain topicality. In the third of "Home-Thoughts," which takes place in the waters that inspired the preceding lyric, the speaker admonishes him who would help England to turn away from noisy earthly feats to silent prayer.

The irony is more pronounced in the next poem, "The Tomb at St. Praxed's." Officially a Christian, the speaker is actually an independent thinker who does not perceive that his speculations are often contrary to Christian doctrine. Like the soliloquizer of the Spanish cloister, he adheres to the outward forms of his religion but is almost totally oblivious to the meaning behind them. He begins his monologue with a quotation from Ecclesiastes—"Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!"—which causes us to believe that we are about to hear a sermon on that text. But immediately we learn that the bishop, as the revised title of 1849 identifies him, is not in the pulpit but in bed. Yet in bed as in the pulpit, the bishop adopts a homiletic manner: "And as she died so must we die our-
selves, / And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream. / Life, how and what is it?” The bishop is infected by a déformation professionelle: throughout his monologue he lapses into his homiletic style.

As he pleads with his sons for a magnificent tomb in which to be buried, he recalls his past (worldly) life, rehearses the recumbent posture of his effigy atop the desired tomb, and slips from time to time into his pulpit manner—all of which serve to point up the discrepancy between what as a Christian prelate he should be and what he actually is. Evidently unconcerned for the salvation of his soul, he is preoccupied with the tomb, which offers him a form of physical immortality. The most telling moral irony is expressed in the quotation from Job: “Swift as a weaver’s shuttle fleet our years: / Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?” Where indeed? According to the bishop, in a beautiful tomb where he may gloat over his defeated rival. The bishop’s greatest fear is not of the Last Judgment but of a cheap sepulcher.

As he continues to talk, his mind becomes muddled. At the beginning when he asked, “Do I live, am I dead?” he knew very well that, though dying, he was still very much alive and able, for perhaps the last time, to entreat his sons to bury him in proper fashion and to bargain with them concerning what they would be willing to give. At the end, however, when he asks the same question, he fancies himself already lying on his entablature atop the tomb, his sons’ “ingratitude” having stabbed him to death.

In the case of the bishop of Saint Praxed’s as in that of the Duke of Ferrara, the monologue serves no strategic purpose. The bishop knows that the more he talks, the less likely he is to get the tomb he wants. The sons have heard all this many times before and they whisper to Anselm that the old man’s at it again. Why then does the bishop continue his monologue? For the same reason that the duke makes his indiscreet remarks to the envoy. The lyric impulse is so strong in each of them that they allow themselves to be carried away by the song of self, the song that they conceive not as condemning but as apologetic and justifying. In the bishop’s own mind, he is an exemplary clergyman—“how I earned the prize!” He has
met all the demands of religious formalism and been a Renaissance humanist to boot. What matter if he violated his priestly vow of celibacy or hated his brother clergyman? He has loved the blessed mutter of the Mass, felt the altar's candle flame, and tasted the strong incense smoke; he has lived with popes and cardinals and priests. What more could be expected of him? And now to crown his life, he must have a beautiful tomb as testimony not only to his Christian life but also to his superiority over his old rival, Gandolf. His sons may not give him what he deserves, but he wants to make clear that he has every right to it and is perfectly justified in whatever self-pity he may feel.

There is an obvious irony in all this. But the great irony is the poet's own intrusion into the monologue, an act that marks the monologue as a poem, calls attention to it as not merely the utterance of a Renaissance bishop but as a work of art. For Browning has designed the monologue as an exemplum, a sermon by example, on the text *Vanitas vanitatem*, the first line (in translation) of the monologue. "The Tomb at St. Praxed's" is thus a sermon unknowingly preached by the bishop; which is to say, the preacher proves his text by the revelation of his own character, and his plea for sympathy becomes a literary form—a sermon—that stands in judgment of him. A poet can hardly go further in achieving so subtly those reflections of the work of art in the work of art itself that characterize Romantic Irony. In brief, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," the title by which it is now known, is a masterpiece. In future years Browning might add to the complexity of his dramatic monologues, but he would never surpass the extraordinary ironic dimension of this poem.

The poems immediately following are of much smaller scale. "Garden Fancies" is composed of "The Flower's Name" and "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," both about language. In the first the speaker's lady has given to an inconspicuous flower without any obvious beauty "its soft meandering Spanish name: / What a name! was it love, or praise? / Speech half-asleep, or song half-awake?" Where "The Flower's Name" deals with the preservative power of language, the second
deals with the uncreating word. The speaker recognizes the book by the author named in the title as the work of a pedant that may well be cast away. He places it in the crevice of the crotch of a plum tree, where it meets with all sorts of teeming animal life that mock the lifeless words. Finding this unquiet grave unfit, the speaker then takes the book to be buried on a bookshelf under other dead books by "A," "B," and "C" to "dry-rot at ease till the Judgment-day!"

The next two poems, with the joint title "France and Spain," are also concerned with language. In the first, "The Laboratory," words disguise the horror of the action: if the lady describes the poison with which she would kill her rival as beautiful, then it cannot be so bad to administer it. The lady, in fact, attempts by language to make murder a fine art. She is an innocent concerning the means to do her deed: "Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?" "And yonder soft phial, . . . —is that poison too?" And it is her very innocence, the quality of the ingenue, that gives a passionate intensity to her monologue and the hatred that it expresses.

Throughout her visit to the laboratory, the lady—wearing a mask of glass to ward off the noxious fumes as well as a mask of language to filter reality—acts as though she were inspecting a flower garden, asking the name of each and admiring its pretty color. This is, however, but the vorpiel to the main play. "Let death be felt and the proof remain; / He is sure to remember her dying face!" she says, preparing the enactment of the drama that she is concocting. And for the man who has put together the requisite properties, she offers, with all the innocence and cold-bloodedness of a diva acting an ingenue: "Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill, / You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!"

In contrast to the dramatic monologue to which it is linked, "The Confessional" is more nearly a romance, the monologue of an imprisoned young woman who was tricked into revealing the secrets of her lover, a political revolutionary. The poem turns on the verb "to lie," in both its physical and linguistic meanings. Having lain with her lover, the girl is shocked to discover that his lips have "kissed / My soul out in a burning mist." She feels guilty not so much for the act of fornication as
for the fact that physical love has supplanted religious love. Confessing her sexual transgressions to a priest, she is informed that she can “turn this love / To lawful love, almost divine”; even further, she can be an angel to save the soul of her lover. All she has to do is ask of her paramour, when he “lies” upon her breast, his plans for political action, then steal off and reveal them to her confessor, who may then act to purge the lover’s soul. Because her father confessor seemed full of “love and truth,” she does as he wishes; her lover tells all, as she “lay listening in such pride,” and she next morning trips off to the confessional “to save his soul in his despite.” The result is that the young man is hanged. As the girl discovers his distorted body on the scaffold, she sees also, “lo,—on high—the father’s face!” Now in prison, she turns her back entirely on religion. Clearly the truth for her is the physical “lying” of passionate lovers, not the “lying” of the Church.

There is a slight revelation of character in this confession, but it results more from the story than from the manner in which the story is told. The same is likewise true of “The Flight of the Duchess,” which also shares the theme of loyalty. The poem seems to hesitate between the narrative and the dramatic modes. This was true of “Waring” of 1842, but as we saw, that poem finally comes down on the side of the dramatic. In the case of “The Flight of the Duchess,” a much longer monologue recounting a more elaborate story, we can never be sure whether the interest should lie in what the speaker sees or how he sees. All commentators refer to it as narrative, yet it has a dramatic setting and a dramatically portrayed speaker.

The monologue takes place in what seems to be a country tavern and is addressed to a long-suffering auditor who sits through 915 lines without saying a word. The speaker begins the story in a tone of beery confidence to his “friend,” apparently a man he has never seen before. Now it may be that he has a design upon his auditor, for two matters, besides the story of the duchess, are very much on his tongue: drink, which he mentions at least twenty times, and friendship, which he praises frequently and which, to my ear at any rate, he protests too much. It may be that he tells the story of the duchess
in hope of a free drink. If so, his hope seems to be unrealized because at the end he speaks of "no further throwing / Pearls before swine that can't value them: Amen" — which utterance may be intended to apply to the listener as well as to the duke.

We can have no assurance that we are to read the poem in this (dramatic) way — and I offer this interpretation unconfidently — because the poet has not, so far as I can see, given us enough clues. If it is merely a dramatic monologue manqué, the fault is perhaps owing to the difference between the original conception and the actual composition of the poem at a later date. Browning said that the idea of the poem grew out of a snatch of song he heard a gypsy singing. Some time soon thereafter he sat down to work on it but was called upon by a visitor and then other interruptions occurred so that he forgot the plan of the poem (Hood, Letters, p. 217). He told Miss Barrett that of "the real conception . . . not a line is written"

— tho' perhaps after all, what I am going to call the accessories in the story are real though indirect reflexes of the original idea, and so supersede properly enough the necessity of its personal appearance, — so to speak: but, as I conceived the poem, it consisted entirely of the gypsy's description of the life the Lady was to lead with her future gipsy lover — a real life, not an unreal one like that with the Duke — and as I meant to write it, all their wild adventures would have come out and the insignificance of the former vegetation have been deducible only — as the main subject has become now. (Kintner, 1:135)

It would appear, therefore, that having the story told by a retainer of the duke's household was an afterthought, which may account for the imperfect dramatic realization of the speaker.

The story itself is one common enough in Browning's later works — a woman rescued from a stultifying marriage to pursue a freer life of emotional fulfillment — but this is its first major expression. Commentators have argued that the poem was a calculated move in the poet's courtship of Elizabeth Barrett, but as we have seen, something of the same pattern of movement is reflected in Colombe's Birthday, written and published before he even met his wife-to-be. Something happened to cause Browning to decide that he would admit the dialectic
struggle between power and love to be irresolvable and that he would declare in favor of love, but showing it to retreat in the face of power. "The Flight of the Duchess" is the retelling of "My Last Duchess," the heroine this time, however, fleeing from the husband besotted by his family lineage. The gypsy woman who helps her escape assures her of "the thrill of the great deliverance," but such a life of love means to "retire apart" (671) from the ordinary world and all its responsibilities, as for Colombe and Valence it required retreat to flowery seclusion. In Browning's world love may no longer be a matter of pathology, but it is not one of healthy acceptance of the world. This is a point continually but unconsciously made by the narrator.

What the narrator proposes to recount is the duchess's tale "from beginning to end" (3). Yet it is the story of himself from start to almost finish. As far as the duchess is concerned, she does not even appear till line 133. The narrator then gives us a brief, straightforward, realistic account of the duke and of the duchess's unhappiness as his wife. But the realistic vein is soon transmuted as the old gypsy is metamorphosed from a crone into a stately woman who speaks with the sound of music and looks with beguiling eye to lend the duchess new life and transform her into a queen. Only at the end does the note of realism return, when he speaks of his dead wife and his duty to the duke. The world of the gypsies is but make-believe, one in which the fancied inhabitants live happily ever after, their story never coming to an end. The world of the huntsman, on the other hand, is all too real, lacking in picturesque adventure perhaps but not without its quiet pleasures, the domestic affections and loyalties that end (because being real they must end) only with death. In romance the protagonist may depart into fancy to be a gypsy wanderer forever, but in the realistic tale, which is that of the huntsman, one "must stay till the end of the chapter" (861). In "The Flight of the Duchess," therefore, we have two versions of love and loyalty—one enclosed and the other open-ended—both of which we are in effect invited to see as true.

Like earlier works "The Flight of the Duchess" portrays characters self-consciously playing roles and speaking in
accord with what they believe the scripts for those roles to be. The narrator presents himself as the plain man ready to tell a tale in an artistic fashion, even in verse, but limited by his halting manner—"More fault of those who had the hammering / Of prosody into me and syntax" (699–700). The duke is a product of Gothic Revival: a "middle-age manners adapter" (861) who talks and acts according to how "old books showed the way of it" and "how taught old painters in their pictures" (228, 231). In the cast of his little play, he is The Duke, his retainers are Serfs, Thralls, Venerers, Prickers, and Verderers. In reality he is effete, artificial, and anachronistic, so frozen in his role (and in a stultifying past) that his duchess, craving for real life, as Browning put it, cannot bear to live with him. Only in "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" does Browning so blatantly make fun of one of the characters in this volume.

"The Flight of the Duchess," although it has some of the same charming improvised air as "The Pied Piper," is not a successful poem because of its imperfectly realized narrator and because it is too long. It is, however, something of an experimental poem in that Browning employs in the opening lines a symbolic landscape.

Ours is a great wild country;
If you climb to our castle's top,
I don't see where your eye can stop;
For when you've pass'd the corn-field country,
Where vineyards leave off, flocks are pack'd,
And sheep-range leads to cattle-tract,
And cattle-tract to open-chase,
And open-chase to the very base
Of the mountain where, at a funeral pace,
Round about, solemn and slow,
One by one, row after row,
Up and up the pine-trees go,
So, like black priests up, and so
Down the other side again
To another greater, wilder country.
That's one vast red drear burnt-up plain,
Branch'd thro' and thro' with many a vein
Whence iron's dug, and copper's dealt;
Look right, look left, look straight before,
Beneath they mine, above they smelt,
Copper-ore and iron-ore,
And forge and furnace mould and melt,
And so on, more and ever more,
Till, at the last, for a bounding belt,
Comes the salt sand hoar of the great sea shore,
—And the whole is our Duke's country!

The mixing of the agricultural and the industrial, the high and the low, the light and the dark, the open and the enclosed—all suggest the course the poem is to follow. This lovely piece of landscape painting is admittedly more or less forced on the huntsman's tale, but it is worthy of remark in that it shows Browning experimenting with more sophisticated modes of narration.

In the first lyric of "Earth's Immortalities," the poet's grave—and by implication his reputation—"wants the freshness of its prime," the work of time having "softened down the crisp-cut name and date." In the second lyric the speaker, who may be the poet of the first, his initial line echoing the last word, "date," of the former, notes how spring's garlands are severed by June's fever, which in turn is quenched in winter's snow—all in constant mockery of the words "Love me for ever!" In "Song" ("Nay, but you, who do not love her"), the irony resides in a form of praeterita. In "The Boy and the Angel," the irony of God's need for the human is set forth in a simple lyric reminiscent of the manner of Blake.

The first lyric of "Night and Morning," now known as "Meeting at Night," is in the present tense and describes the lover's coming to meet his beloved, the rhythm and imagery suggesting tension and anticipation until the final coming to rest with "two hearts beating each to each." In the lyric now known as "Parting at Morning," which is one-third the length of the preceding one and which is related in the first person and in the past tense, there is no question of romantic love, as the speaker refuses to delude himself that rapture can sustain life: departing from the night's meeting, he declares "the need
of a world of men."

"Claret and Tokay" are overly cute associations of certain wines with certain countries and are unworthy of mention save that they evince Browning's penchant for dramatizing everything, even bottles of claret and tokay. 

"Saul" was printed as a fragment in 1845. It consisted of short half-lines instead of the anaplectic pentameters with which we are now familiar, and it ended with the present section nine of the completed poem. These 102 lines, sung to the spiritually benumbed King Saul by the shepherd boy David, recall earth's beauties and bounties, great moments in Jewish history, his people's hymns of aspiration, the greatness of Saul's accomplishment—in short, all the things that Saul has to be thankful for. The matter and the manner of the song, largely a cataloguing of events and details, are doubtless borrowed from Christopher Smart, especially his "Song to David." As it stands in 1845, the poem leaves us with the situation of a man who has everything to praise God for being unable to utter a word or even lift his eyes to heaven. Browning may not have been able to complete it either because after 102 lines he had exhausted the matter and manner of his model or because he had not in 1845 arrived at the stage of his religious development that would enable him to offer the Christian answer of the completed version.

As a fragment (or even as a completed poem, for that matter), the monologue is generically unlike anything else in the 1845 volume. It is not a dramatic monologue because there is no revelation of character. It has a number of narrative elements, but clearly it is not primarily intended to tell a story. What it most nearly resembles is a Davidic psalm—and of course it would be very like Browning to have his David sing in the manner of the reputed author of Psalms. In any case, the fragmentary "Saul" is a highly experimental poem, blending lyric, narrative, and dramatic elements in almost equal proportions. Browning recognized that some song of a different nature was required to bring Saul out of his lethargy and so complete the poem. The solution he eventually hit upon was to go beyond Psalms, as in the first nine sections he has gone beyond the Historical Books, to the Prophets; but that is
a story for later telling, the completed poem not being published till 1855.

"Time's Revenges" deals with romantic love. On the one hand, the soliloquizer has a loyal friend who would go to any length of trouble for him but for whom he cares almost nothing. On the other hand, he has a ladylove who, although he has given up body and soul for her, not only would not help him in distress but would let him roast over a slow fire if this would procure her an invitation to a famous ball. In the end there is a balance of loyalties: his indifference to his friend is avenged by the indifference the lady shows toward him. Demanding obstacles to be erected and overcome so that he can prove himself "that sea / Of passion" which he "needs must be," the soliloquizer reminds us that every romantic lover is engaged in playing a role.

"Time's Revenges" is like a prelude to the next and last poem in the volume, for its ironies of loyalty and disloyalty are developed at greater length and with greater complexity in "The Glove." The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by the French poet Pierre Ronsard at the court of Francis I. Browning makes daring use of him, for he has Ronsard report, accurately enough, the details of the central story yet be himself a not totally sympathetic or even reliable narrator. His use of the speaker is, then, slightly different from that of earlier dramatic monologues, for the speaker here tells a story in which he was not involved other than as a spectator and thus has no need to defend or apologize for himself where the details of that story are concerned. It is only when the speaker refers to himself and others in relation to him that we must be wary and carefully scrutinize what he has to say. In terms of genre this means that "The Glove" is a dramatic monologue incorporating a narrative that is the main business of the monologue. It is truly a dramatic romance. All this may be obvious enough, but I do not recall having read any commentary that questions the total reliability of the speaker and thus reads the poem as anything other than a narrative monologue or romance.

We have noted frequently the number of times that Browning calls attention to language as a mask for deception. In
"The Glove" he again cautions us, indirectly, to suspect ulterior meanings behind the words spoken by making rhetoric a dominant motif of the poem. Ronsard speaks as a buffoon, sounding like a cross between Samuel Butler and Thomas Hood; his words are rendered in fairly regular trimeter couplets all having feminine rhyme. He accuses others of making "fine speeches like gold" (90), intending by the term to suggest the pretensions and triviality of the court. His harshest words, however, are reserved for the poet Clément Marot, whom he regards as a rival "whose experience of nature's but narrow, / And whose faculties move in no small mist" (46–47) and who is supposedly given to learned talk. Yet when the king asks for a verse, the best Ronsard can do is quote Ovid to the effect that "men are the merest Ixions" (14), whereupon the king interrupts to suggest that they go look at the lions. "Such," says Ronsard, "are the sorrowful chances / If you talk fine to King Francis" (17–18). Further, he reports that when the lady departed after the glove episode, Marot stayed behind while he followed to ask "what it all meant" (119). He goes up to her and says, "For I am a Poet: / Human nature,—behooves that I know it!" (121–22). Surely such blatant posturizing (and such insipid rhymes) mark him as not much of a poet at all. Ronsard may not make "fine speeches like gold," but it may be because he is not capable of them. He may assume an ironic pose as a protest against the decadence of King Francis's court, but behind the pose there is little more than vacuity.

The lady's speech is rendered in somewhat irregular trimeter couplets all of male rhyme. Her speech sounds like human conversation instead of buffoonery. Although she holds views of mere words that seem to coincide with Ronsard's, we know that in her case they are not expressed simply for the benefit of others. The court is in fact depraved, from King Francis down. The talk is of superficialities or of views not truly held. Thus DeLorge wooed her with protestations of love and of his willingness to risk all danger for her sake. Too long she had heard "of the deed proved alone by the word" (124), so on the spur of the moment, as she reflected on what had been suffered by so many that the king might have a lion to look at as
a sometime amusement, she decided to test DeLorge’s words and threw the glove into the pit.

It is part of the irony of the tale that neither the lady nor Ronsard perceives that DeLorge’s were not merely empty words. DeLorge had said that he would brave death if she commanded it, and when he leaps into the lion’s pit to retrieve the glove she threw there, this is exactly what he does. The lady had thought to test his bravery or, rather, to discover the extent of his love by probing his courage. He proves his mettle, backs up word with deed, and does it, apparently, not only because the eyes of the court are upon him but also because of his regard for the lady and for the promises made to her. But her wanton disregard of his life causes him to question the object of that regard and, having fetched the glove, he gives public notice that he is through with her forever. The flinging of the glove into the lady’s face is thus a symbolic act of praise and dispraise, of praise of himself for having endured the ordeal and dispraise of the one who forced such an ordeal upon him. As for the lady herself, she had every right to know whether her lover’s protestations had any reality in deed. Yet from the trial she discovers his courage only to lose his love. It is worth noting that she makes no demands of her next lover to pass a similar test.

Objectively we have no reason to believe the lady more in the right than DeLorge. Most readers—all readers so far as I can find—see the right as belonging exclusively to the lady’s side simply because the narrator says this is the way it should be. But as we have already noted, his is a flawed character, and we cannot accept what he says any more uncritically than we can accept what Browning’s other narrators say. The king pronounces for the knight, saying, “’twas mere vanity, / Not love, set the task to humanity” (101–2). In a way his judgment is just as correct as Ronsard’s, which is that the lady flung the glove so as “to know what she had not to trust to” (115). The fact that Marot does not go running after her the way Ronsard does also gives us additional reason for not fully accepting the speaker’s view of the situation. This is again a case where, in Thirlwall’s words quoted earlier, “characters, motives, and principles are brought into hostile collision, in which good and
evil are so inextricably blended on each side, that we are compelled to give an equal share of our sympathy to each.

The story of the subsequent marriages of DeLorge and the lady to other people does not help us to come down finally on the side of one or the other. Ronsard says that the lady carried her shame from the court and married a youth of lower social status. The court foresees unhappiness in this mixed marriage, but “to that marriage some happiness” Ronsard “dared augur” (169–70). We wonder whether we can trust his prophecy any more than the court’s.

As for DeLorge, he married a renowned beauty, who eventually became King Francis’s mistress for a week. DeLorge, now serving the king not as knight but as courtier, is frequently “honored” with the commission to fetch his wife’s gloves from her chamber while the king is in conversation with her. When DeLorge appears with the gloves, the king always tells the story of this modern Daniel in the lion’s den and his wife always says that nowadays he brings the gloves and “utters no murmur” (188). Obviously Ronsard includes this story to show how DeLorge has been placed in the ignominious position of assisting the king to enjoy his wife’s favor and, further, been subjected to pleasantries upon his discomfiture. DeLorge’s marital distress may be a fact, but does this in any way validate the lady’s wanton demand that he enter a lion’s cage to retrieve her glove?

As we have already seen, Browning frequently arranges the final lines of a dramatic monologue as a summation of a character or situation. Here in the last two lines of “The Glove” he does more or less the same thing. “Venienti occurrite morbo! / With which moral I drop my theorbo,” says Ronsard in farewell. This piece of macaronic verse is a fitting summation of the character who has told us the story. First, it suggests the “fine” writer manqué, one retreating into doggerel and burlesque to show his contempt for what he cannot do but nevertheless employing the learned language that he makes fun of his rival Marot for using. Second, the Latin proverb offered as the moral is not a particularly felicitous one. “Go to meet the approaching ill”? Far more apropos as a moral would have been the scriptural counsel Sufficit diei malitia sua. Third, the
theorbo, the lute with two necks, suggests the two contending strains of the narrative that merge into the song, the dramatic lyric, which is "The Glove."  

As a dramatic monologue recounting a tale of opposing loyalties, "The Glove" fittingly brings the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* to a close. Thematically all the poems—with the possible exception of "Claret and Tokay," which themselves may be about national loyalties—are concerned with many kinds of loyalties. In manner all are dramatic. In range of subject matter and prosody, they are enormously variegated. To this extent the 1845 poems bear a strong resemblance to the *Dramatic Lyrics* of 1842. The difference between the two volumes lies in the greater complexity of the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. For here Browning makes his poems more allusive, more densely packed with different levels of meaning. In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," for example, there is not only a perfect evocation of what Ruskin called the Renaissance spirit but also an implied comment on contemporary Anglo-Catholic ritualism. Or, to take another instance, "The Italian in England" is not only a celebration of the patriot typified by Mazzini but a study of the stultifying effect of exile for the political revolutionary. A large number of the poems in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* deal with contemporary matters—the Corn Laws, the hunger and poverty of the 1840s, Puseyism, the laureateship, Austrian domination of Italy—of general concern in 1845. In short, the poet was turning toward a sociocultural scene to make meaning. But he was not thereby forgoing irony. For he gives us an ironic reading of society and history embodied in a form that only superficially is a little less extravagant than that of *Sordello* and *Pippa Passes*.

In *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, Browning perfected the dramatic monologue. Though hereafter he was to write other exquisite monologues, they were formally to be but variations on those in this collection. Perceiving the quality of Browning's achievement, Walter Savage Landor wrote and published, in the *Morning Chronicle* for 22 November 1845, one of the most generous compliments ever paid by one poet to another.
There is delight in singing, tho' none hear
Beside the singer: and there is delight
In praising, tho' the praiser sit alone
And see the prais'd far off him, far above.
Shakespeare is not our poet, but the world's,
Therefore on him no speech! and brief for thee,
Browning! Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
No man hath walkt along our road with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse. But warmer climes
Give brighter plumage, stronger wing: the breeze
Of Alpine highths thou playest with, borne on
Beyond Sorrento and Amalfi, where
The Siren waits thee, singing song for song.

Landor recognized that by 1845 his friend had become
"Browning," a name to be listed, along with Shakespeare and
Chaucer, among the greatest English poets.