CHAPTER IX
LURIA AND A SOUL'S TRAGEDY

UPON COMPLETION OF COLOMBE'S BIRTHDAY, Browning had intended to “stop some things that were meant to follow, and begin again” (Domett, p. 106). Now that he had “begun again” and published Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, he returned to those pieces that were meant to follow. “I have one done here, 'A Soul's Tragedy,’ ” he told Elizabeth Barrett early in their correspondence (Kintner, 1:26). It but needed revision. Another he had been thinking about: “this darling 'Luria'—so safe in my head & a tiny slip of paper” (Kintner, 1:18). Yet however “darling” Luria might be in conception, the poet had little pleasure in the actual writing of it, and it was not finished till more than a year later. Even though he had lost interest in the drama as a literary form, Browning felt that he had to complete these two plays. They had to be “got rid of,” he told Miss Barrett. Some things “I should like to preserve and print now, leaving the future to spring as it likes, in any direction,—and these half-dead, half-alive works fetter it, if left behind” (Kintner, 1:77, 451). And to his friend Alfred Domett, he wrote: “I felt so instinctively that unless I tumbled out the conceptions, I should bear them forever, and year by year get straiter and stiffer, and at last parturition would be the curse indeed” (Domett, p. 127).

By 1845 Browning had written and published five plays for the theater, only two of which had been produced on the stage, and they with but indifferent success. He had had a serious falling out with Macready, and he had become convinced of the stupidity of theatrical folk in general. It “never entered into my mind,” he wrote to a friend about Charles Kean and the possible production of Colombe's Birthday, “that anybody, even an actor, could need a couple of months to study a part, only, in a piece, which I could match with another in less time by a good deal” (Hood, Letters, p. 10). In addition, his growing aversion to the theater was encouraged by Miss Barrett,
who frankly told him, "I have wondered at you sometime, not for daring, but for bearing to trust your noble works into the great mill of the 'rank, popular' playhouse, to be ground to pieces between the teeth of vulgar actors and actresses." "And what is Luria?" she asked hopefully, "A poem and not a drama?" (Kintner, 1:22).

Browning appears already to have made up his mind to quit writing for the theater by the time he began correspondence with Miss Barrett. In any event, answering her question he replied: "That 'Luria' you enquire about, shall be my last play...for it is but a play, woe's me!" (Kintner, 1:26). But, in extenuation, it was to be "for a purely imaginary Stage" (Kintner, 1:251). Moreover, though originally conceived "in the 'high fantastical' style," it was to be "very simple and straightforward," an antidote to "the general charge against me of abrupt, spasmodic writing" (Kintner, 1:251, 281). The play was finished in February 1846, and although he had doubts about the wisdom of publishing Luria and A Soul's Tragedy together, he began reworking the earlier play upon completion of Luria. The two were published in April 1846 as the eighth and last number of Bells and Pomegranates, with a dedication to Walter Savage Landor stating that these two pieces were his "last attempts for the present at dramatic writing."

Echoing the preface to Strafford, in which he described his historical play as "one of Action in Character, rather than Character in Action," Browning said of Luria: "It is all in long speeches—the action, proper, is in them—they are no descriptions, or amplifications—but there...in a drama of this kind, all the events, (and interest), take place in the minds of the actors" (Kintner, 1:381). But if Luria and Strafford are alike in having psychological action as the central dramatic action, the general dramatic method of the two plays is, however, far different. Where the earlier is based on Elizabethan models, the later owes more to neoclassical drama, especially in its focus on one character and its observance of the unities of time, place, and action. Moreover, with its long speeches and its dramatic emphasis upon one character, Luria reflects Browning's increasing dedication to the monologue form. "I have a fancy that your great dramatic power would work more clearly &
audibly in the less definite mould,” Elizabeth Barrett told him (Kintner, 1:30). Hereafter Browning was to heed her advice and his own inclination to work outside the formal drama.

As we have noted, tragedy does not easily accommodate Browning’s kind of irony. The poet himself was perhaps more aware of this than ever while working on *Luria*. Describing his protagonist and his other characters, Browning admitted that “for me, the misfortune is, I sympathize just as much with these as with him” (Kintner, 1:26). Such divided loyalties could not easily be forced into tragedy, which calls for a hero clearly superior in nearly every way to those around him. It is perhaps not unduly fanciful to say that in *Luria* Browning undertakes to consider the very question that his aesthetic problem posed: What is the nature of the hero in a society (or a literary form) that does not accept him?

In *The Return of the Druses*, Browning had portrayed a hero who discovers his true heroism in trying to prove it to others. In *Luria*, on the other hand, he presents a hero whose noble deeds are obvious and whose greatness in battle is acclaimed by all yet who in all likelihood is to be refused the hero’s laur­rels by those very persons whom he saves. Doubtlessly lurking in Browning’s mind during the composition of *Luria* were not only his own thoughts about the lack of appreciation awarded him as a poet but also many ideas on the great man expounded by Carlyle, earlier in the decade, in the lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship.*

When a savior appears to a people standing on the brink of direst peril, what is his fate among those he saves? Consideration of this question is the means by which Browning once again studies the dialectic of power and love.

Puccio calls Luria “the quiet patient hero” (4. 50) who hastened to the city’s call “to save her as only he could” (1. 24). Domizia pronounces Luria the unselfconscious “saviour” (1. 264): “Such save the world which none but they could save, / Yet think whate’er they did, that world could do” (1. 355–56). Like all true heroes he was sent by God in response to an extreme need. “Time was for thee to rise, and thou art here,” she tells him (4. 216). Luria has brought “new feeling fresh from God” for the people “to mould, interpret
and prove right" (5. 264–65). His life reteaches what life
should be, what faith, loyalty, and simpleness are—qualities
once revealed in the Incarnation of Christ, but this so long ago
that there is but a tradition of the fact, not a felt experience of
the fact, "truth copied falteringingly from copies faint." In Luria
the people see the old truth return (5. 266–78).

Braccio, on the other hand, is highly suspicious of "those
same great ones," finding that with all their "unconsciousness"
they nonetheless never shrink from taking up whatever offices
that involve "the whole world's safety or mishap / Into their
mild hands [as] a thing of course" (1. 357–63). Holding society
more important than any individual, Braccio says that Floren­
ce cannot tolerate so-called great men: they crave power
and thus must somehow be subjugated to society immediately
upon the victories achieved for the sake of society (3. 177–202,
256–70). Tiburzio, the Pisan general, is without illusions as to
the fate of heroes. In saving Florence, Luria seeks "the sure
destruction saviours find" (2. 185). Pisa would treat him in a
similar way had the outcome of the battle been different
(2. 231–37). But, in contrast to Braccio, Tiburzio believes in
the superiority of the hero to the herd. For great men serve "as
models for the mass" and thus "are singly of more value than
they all." Hero worship is hence something like a religious
duty because, as Carlyle said, history is a series of great men
who bring authentic tidings from God. Lives of great men
remind the mass that they too can make their lives sublime:
"Keep but the model safe, new men will rise / To study it .
" (5. 300–310).

While others put their faith in the hero, Luria holds by Flor­
ence as the embodiment of all that man can hope for. In fact,
Florence "stands for Mankind" (2. 242). He "believes in Flor­
ence as the Saint / Tied to the wheel believes in God" (1. 108–
9). Florence is for Luria, Browning told Miss Barrett, "his reli­
gion" (Kintner, 1:411). When Luria speaks of the city, he does
so "as the Mage Negro King to Christ the Babe" (1. 382–83).
Because he is "nearer Florence than her sons" and has made
her the symbol of all that makes life worthwhile, the very
thought that Florence can betray him is extremely unsettling.
For if the city fails him, he has nothing left to believe in or
fight for (2.243-49). "What would be left, the life's illusion,— / What hope or trust in the forlorn wide world?" (4.266-67).

Earlier we have noted the numerous instances in which a male lover submits to his "queen," whom he urges to exert her power over him. In Luria the hero still has the same need for power to be incarnated, but here it is a city-state that he devises to make "queen / Of the country" (5.45-46). He laments his new position of general officer who must stand aloof from battle, wishing instead to have remained a captain who has all the joy of the fight. In the inferior post he would have felt, in someone over him, "Florence impersonate," a "visible Head," and thus be able to take "life / Directly from her eye" (1.277-84). Luria is, however, a Moor, not a Florentine; and although he has experienced the thrill of coming to Florence, being changed by her, and "feeling a soul grow that restricts / The boundless unrest of the savage heart" (1.321-24), the fact remains, says his friend Husain, that there stands a wall between their "expansive and explosive race / And those absorbing, concentrating men" of Florence. For Luria as for Browning's earlier heroes, the tension between expansion and contraction must remain unresolved. For all his love of Florence, he can never truly be a Florentine anymore than Othello, his prototype, can be a Venetian.

Luria is not content, however, to remain simply a Moor in Florence; he and Florence must be one. "Incompleteness, incompleteness!" he wails (1.238). Power and love, Luria and Florence—he would have all "decisive and complete" (1.244). Thus he superimposes a Moorish design on the facade of the still incomplete Duomo, "his fancy how a Moorish front / Might join to, and complete, the body" (1.124-25). But working against Luria's aspiration for wholeness are the forces of reality, personified in Braccio, who finds that "the Moorish front ill suits our Duomo's body" and thus commands, "Blot it out!" (1.210-11).

The play dramatizes Luria's gradual discovery that the kind of Sordelloesque wholeness he aspires to is unattainable. What he learns is what Paracelsus learned just before his death: that in the state of becoming that characterizes all life, things can
never remain the same, that one thing is always replacing another:

    e'en tho' better follow, good must pass,
    Nor manhood's strength can mate with boyhood's grace,
    Nor age's wisdom in its turn find strength,
    But silently the first gift dies away,
    And tho' the new stays—never both at once!

(2. 272–76)

There is indeed a barrier between himself and Florence and the Florentines (3. 393–95). The East is distinguished by feeling, the North by thought. Instead of bringing the virtues of the East to the North, he should have chosen the reverse "mission" of bringing the North to the East, "giving Thought's character and permanence / To the too-transitory Feelings there— / Writing God's message in mortal words!" (5. 250–52).

But even though he doubts the validity of his own role, he never allows himself to question his conception of Florence. For if the union of love and power cannot be realized in his own life, at least he must guard, as a necessity of his own psychic well-being, the idea that somewhere they are indeed joined. Time after time he has opportunity to investigate Florence's intentions with respect to him, and just as often he refuses to inquire further lest his ideal collapse into a meaningless illusion. In the end he decides that it would not serve his soul to destroy its allegiance to its highest dream. He kills himself so that Florence, the city in which he has placed all his faith and which has become the spiritual basis of his life, will not prove, in its execution of him, other than what he believed her to be. Taking a phial of poison, he drinks to the salvation of the city and the maintenance of his dream of her: thus "we Florentines" can serve "our Florence" (4. 306, 304; emphasis added). The irony of loyalty, a constant theme in all Browning's plays, here becomes pure absurdity.

Luria is fully aware that mankind can stand only so much reality, which means that he is conscious of the unreality of
many of his actions and those of others. This in turn means
that he sees himself as acting a role in a play, a conviction that
he shares with the other characters. The basic play may have
been written elsewhere and by someone else, but it is Braccio
who is seen by Luria and the others as the metteur en scène
and reviser of the script. "What you created," Luria says to
him, "see that you find food for" (1.337). In Luria as in
Colombe's Birthday, papers and documents are not only theat­
rical properties but also parts of the text, Braccio here provid­
ning most of them to keep the action going.

The text begins with this stage direction: "Braccio, as dictat­
ing to his Secretary"; and with this bit of dialogue: Braccio
asking Puccio to read over the commissary's account of the
soldier's report. As the dialogue develops, Puccio notes that
the report does not contain any praise of Luria, the new com­
mander of the Florentine forces, whereupon Braccio incorpo­
rates this into his text. When Puccio departs, however, Brac­
cio, according to the stage directions, "slowly tears the paper
into shreds." The action in these first fifty lines is emblematic
of the action of the entire play, its scripts, and (borrowing a
word from Colombe's Birthday) rescripts. Braccio constantly
writes and revises, yet all the while recognizing the absurdity
of his reports, which are mere exercises in the art of fiction,
means by which he manipulates his readers of the Florentine
Signory to act in the way he wants. All these "proofs," he says,
"weigh with me less than least; as nothing weigh!" He alters
his text so as to prevent certain results and to bring about
others: "I go! / On what I know must be, yet while I live /
Will never be" (1.185–89).

The extraordinary aspect of these constant inquiries and
reports is that all the characters seem to know that Braccio is
setting down words that do not accurately reflect their past
actions but that will determine how they act in future. Luria,
for example, comes unexpectedly upon Braccio discoursing
with his secretary, Jacopo: "it was in that paper / What you
were saying!" Braccio frankly admits, "I censure you to Flo­
rence: will you see?" But Luria refuses to read it because if he
did so Braccio would simply write another to mention "that
important circumstance" (1.217–24). In a more prominent
instance, Tiburzio presents Luria with one of Braccio's captured dispatches to read. "And act on what I read?" (2. 240). He refuses to read it because to do so would mean following a script, even though the script means that certain actions will be eventually imposed upon him. Although he has "the means / Of knowing what his reward will be" (2. 317–18), he tears the letter up. This is in Luria's mind doubtless an act of defiance and assertion of free will, yet even he knows that, whatever his action in this instance, the script remains in a duplicate copy and that, willy-nilly, he must act in accord with it. All the characters have a sense of fate at work in their lives that predestines them to the enactment of roles assigned them, either with or against their wills. All may declare, as Puccio does, that they refuse to live "on orders, warrants, patents and the like" (5. 101), but they nevertheless feel that they have little scope for evasion of the words that control their actions.

Even though Luria wishes to be Florentine, he is consigned by Braccio to the role of "our inevitable foe," no matter how much he may engage in "mere dissimulation" of another role (1. 155, 374). Luria cannot be allowed to show himself as a victorious Florentine general; it would be a serious miscasting of the part: "the black face, the barbarous name, / For Italy to boast her show of the age, / Her man of men!" (1. 389–91). Domizia likewise agrees that such casting of the role is more than slightly amiss: "black faces in the camp / Where moved those peerless brows and eyes of old!" (2. 51–52).

His friend Husain argues that Luria is being forced to play a certain role: "They use thee"; they "fashion thee anew"; they say, "here shalt thou move" (2. 84, 113, 121). And Luria, recently become aware that the Florentines will never accept him in the part he wants to play, agrees that "an alien force like mine / Is only called to play its part outside / Their different nature" (2. 85–87). Now that he has acted that role, he will depart from the stage: "my use is over, . . . 'tis best I go" (2. 97–98). Whatever his desires to the contrary, he will remain "the Moor" (3. 398). "So at the last must figure Luria then!" (4. 248).

Where Braccio plays the schemer who revises the script to suit his convenience—the type of wily Florentine epitomized
by Machiavelli—his secretary, Jacopo, is merely the amanuensis and witness of the action: "I observe / The game, watch how my betters play" (4. 4–5). Puccio realizes that he himself is but a kind of puppet whose strings are pulled by Braccio (4. 6–11). "I am," he tells the commissary,

as you have made me, and shall die
A mere trained fighting hack to serve your end;
With words, you laugh at while they leave your mouth,
For my life's rules and ordinance of God!

(4. 64–67)

Domizia, who seeks vengeance against Florence for the harm done her family, regards herself as a talented player of the role of intriguer, but in reality her part is allotted to her by Braccio, who has had her posted to the camp so that he can oversee her actions (1. 172–75).

The last act brings a reversal in the roles of the principals. Luria himself comes to the conclusion that his "natural" role is his best: "I, born a Moor, lived half a Florentine; / But, properly punished, can die a Moor" (5. 209–10). Domizia, forswearing the use of Luria as an agent of her vengeance, is now become "another woman" (5. 184) who gives her love to him. Puccio turns against his puppeteer and vows no longer to live according to how the strings are pulled but be his own man and follow Luria into exile or death (5. 100–12). Jacopo will no longer "move with Braccio as the masterwind" but "must move" with Luria (5. 172–74). Braccio himself tells "in just a word the whole": his past errors and his new belief in Luria as one as capable of the exercise of love as of power (5. 321–33).

Browning said that "the last act throws light back on all" (Kintner, 1:411). Doubtless he meant that the reversal in act five is designed to point up the ironic difference between the way things are and the way they could be. In the grand scheme of things, there is gradual progress in the "soul" of mankind, and one day it may be that human potentialities for good will be realized. "All now is possible," Braccio tells Luria, only at that very moment to discover that the general is dead. Luria himself makes the better judgment: "If one could
wait! The only fault's with Time: / All men become good creatures...but so slow!” (5. 180–81). To try to hurry the process—for the “lesser,” as Luria calls it, to ape the “greater”—is, in existential and theatrical terms, to play a role for which one has no natural talent and thus to be miscast.

Miss Barrett was puzzled by the last act. She lamented Luria’s suicide as unheroical, for example. “But you are a dramatic poet & right perhaps, where, as a didactic poet, you would have been wrong” (Kintner, 1:406). Browning replied that if the character is properly drawn, Luria stands “in such a position as to render any other end impossible without the hurt to Florence which his religion is, to avoid inflicting : his aim is to prevent the harm she will do herself by striking him—so he moves aside from the blow—But I know there is much to improve and heighten ” (Kintner, 1:411).

Apparently the poet had at this time not yet decided to have Florence’s judgment of his hero made known. It is, of course, an additional irony for the protagonist to learn that his dream of Florence that he kills himself to preserve is not a dream after all, that in fact his suicide is pointless; but such an ending is uncharacteristically Browningesque. Ever since Paracelsus the poet had taken an ambiguous attitude towards the nature of destiny in the near future. As “a dramatic poet” he had shown that it is the condition of human existence for man not to know the truth of his “religion.” But evidently, whether because of the influence of Miss Barrett or not, Browning was becoming “a didactic poet” and thereby reducing the ironic tensions of his work.

There are, nevertheless, tensions that are as much in evidence here as in the earlier works. The difference is that here Browning comes down more in favor of one position than of the other and leaves us with none of those tantalizing questions that occur at the end of even so late a play as Colombe’s Birthday, in which power is left to travel its weary way without love and love is left to live in seclusion without social responsibility. In Luria the conflict between feeling and reason, a form of the contention between love and power, is resolved, and there is no question that the resolution is not the correct one. Puccio decides for the “glowing eye . / To glance straight
inspiration to [his] brain” (5. 102–3). Jacopo, who “used to hold by the instructed brain,” finds that “the heart leads surelier” (5. 172, 174). Domizia renounces scheming for “new feeling” (5. 265). Braccio admits “his old great error” of placing all his faith in man’s power of reason. Luria says in his “own East” the people are “nearer God” and feel “the everlasting minute of creation” (5. 228–33). Feeling is of course transitory and hence needs “thought’s character and permanence” (5. 251–52), but there is no doubt that feeling is superior to thought. In the end the play is unequivocal in pronouncing that though the “completeness” for which Luria, like Sordello, was seeking may not be attainable, the best form of “incompleteness” lies in the recognition of the superiority of feeling to reason, of the individual to society, of love to power.

The play is, as Elizabeth Barrett characterized it, complete (Kintner, 2:569); it is fully enclosed and therefore least like Browning, who had shown plainly, time after time over the past eleven years, that completeness can be achieved only at the cost of vitality. Through act four Luria proceeds along typical Browningesque lines, though without a character like D’Ormea, Guendolyn, or Guibert to point up the ironies of the action. But then act five, with its wholesale conversions, brings matters to the rounded close of tragedy. Browning recognized that it was wrong: the play, he said, “is a pure exercise of cleverness—clever attempted reproductions of what was conceived by another faculty, and foolishly let pass away” (Kintner, 1:551). While writing the tragedy, he had Elizabeth Barrett foremost in his mind and apparently tried to write the kind of (“didactic”) play she would like: “I say in excuse to myself,—unlike the woman at her spinning-wheel, ‘he thought of his flax on the whole far more than of his singing’—more of his life’s sustainment, of dear, dear Ba, than of these wooden figures—no wonder all is as it is!” (Kintner, 1:551).

A Soul’s Tragedy, the second piece in the last number of Bells and Pomegranates, is almost totally different from Luria in structure, theme, and mode. Composed of two parts (later called acts) like King Victor and King Charles, and dealing
with a protagonist without principles or illusions, it is, in spite of its name, not a tragedy but a comedy. Unlike Luria, A Soul's Tragedy has, Browning told Miss Barrett, "no trace of you—you have not put out the black face of it—it is all sneering and disillusion" (Kintner, 1:451). Though, as we shall see, the play may contain more of Miss Barrett than Browning consciously knew, it nonetheless stands in sharpest contrast to the first in the pamphlet and indeed at times seems almost a parody of it.

In A Soul's Tragedy heroes and heroism are matters not of serious concern but for quiet amusement. The populace are only too willing to proclaim anyone who even appears heroic as "our saviour," "thrice-noble saviour" (1. 377, 2. 5–6). "Come forth to counsel us, our chief, our king," they say. "Come and harangue us in the market-place!" (1. 387, 390). No wonder that Ogniben appears humming "Why do the people clamor?" (2. 95). The acclaimed savior, however, is a fraud, and the real hero is unrecognized. Only when a wise man comes to view the situation is the charlatan sent packing.

Chiappino is proclaimed a hero simply because he acts like one. For years he wore the "coarse disguise" of the beaten man beset by troubles from all sides (1. 338). His "tongue was tied" because of the position in which he found himself, while others of "slight, free, loose and incapacious soul" might give their tongues "scope to say whate'er [they] would" (1. 188, 170–71). In fact, silence is the only possession that he can lay claim to (1. 20–21). His "part" is to play the martyr as others enjoy the "parts" of the privileged (1. 135). It is, however, he himself who writes the script for the play enacted, as he recites his fancy of what the world says about himself and Luitolfo (1. 58–89), what Luitolfo tells the provost and Luitolfo's report of the interview (2. 212–14), what the city will say concerning his banishment (1. 221–27), and what Luitolfo will say upon his return to the house (1. 275–89). But suddenly when he sees the opportunity to portray the strong man, he ceases to be a "mere accomplice" (1. 356) and becomes the chief actor: "I am master here," he twice says (1. 337, 352). Now in a new part, "I can't be silent...I must speak...or sing—/ How natural to sing now" (1. 360–61). "Here they come, crowds! If they
would drag one to the market-place / One might speak there!” (1. 371, 374–75). And that is precisely where he is invited to address them and speak the words appropriate for their “saviour.” Hereafter Chiappino interests himself only in “performance” and “public appearance” (2. 298, 371). As we shall see, “profession” and “principle” are of no importance for such “performing natures” (2. 311).

Part one is called “The Poetry of Chiappino’s Life.” Because of this designation and because of the title of the play itself, commentators on the work see it as the tragedy “about a great mind and soul turning to ill.” It may be that Chiappino’s taking the blame for the attack on the provost is altruistic, but this seems unlikely in that there is no evidence anywhere earlier of altruism in Chiappino’s nature. He takes Luitolfo’s place because he wants to exhibit himself as the doer of heroic deeds. Better to receive “men’s vengeance” than to be at best a “mere accomplice” in exile (1. 355–56). Part one is the poetry of Chiappino’s life because in it he is given the chance to “speak...or sing” at last (1. 360). Finally he has a proper stage on which to perform. To be sure, there is the opportunity even in this deception for the “soul” to grow, but Chiappino does not avail himself of it.

Part two is called the “Prose” of Chiappino’s life because in it the would-be singer is shown to be but a noisy speaker of empty rhetoric. It is Ogniben who appears singing, “thro’ the streets humming a ‘cur fremuère gentes’” (95). Where Chiappino’s is a song of self, Ogniben’s is the song of ironic humor. Chiappino claims to possess a “soul that can perceive / The outward and the inward, nature’s good / And God’s” (1. 262–64). The claimed wholeness of insight leads him to speak “in praise of a pure Republic” and “a perfect State” (2. 138, 240) and of Eulalia as the female embodiment of beauty, virtue, and wisdom whom he will love forever. Yet when offered the provostship, he accepts with alacrity, justifying his action by arguing that he changes no principles, only adapts them. And when Eulalia charges that he does not love her as he claimed, he replies that his “soul’s capacity for love widens—needs more than one object to control it,—and being better instructed, will not persist in seeing all the component parts of
love in what is only a single part,—nor in finding the so many and so various loves united in the love of a woman” (2. 264–70). In the character of Chiappino, all avowed love yields at the drop of a hat to a craven wish for power; profession but serves as a mask for performance.

It is the “humour” of Ogniben to unmask Chiappino’s professions and show them up for what they really are. “I help men to carry out their principles,” he says. “If they please to say two and two make five, I assent, if they will but go on and say four and four make ten” (2. 365–68). He judges people by what they might be, not are or will be; thus inverting the cliché, he values men not by their performances but by what they profess. And acting on this premise, he proceeds to show that Chiappino fails more in profession than in performance, however reprehensible that performance might be. “Observe, I speak only as you profess to think and so ought to speak—I do justice to your own principles, that is all” (2. 480–82). For, ironically, it is Chiappino’s fault to profess too much. He aspires to a pure republic when obviously in sixteenth-century Italy such a government has no hope of realization; he can only love “a woman that could understand the whole of me” when, says Ogniben, such a one who could “comprehend you” must necessarily be “not merely as great as yourself, but greater considerably” (2. 349–50, 339–43). His professions exceed the possibility of performance and thus he must fail, whereas Luitolfo, who professes only “standing stockishly, plodding soberly, suffering with due patience” (2. 641–44), succeeds.

Unexpectedly and ironically it is the “prose” part of Chiappino’s life that contains the amusing good sense of Ogniben, whom Browning characterized to Miss Barrett as “a man of wide speculation” with “universal understanding of men and sympathy with them” (Kintner, 2:579).10 Ogniben speaks only in prose, yet clearly his prose is much wiser than Chiappino’s verse. He touches on almost all the ideas dear to his author’s heart: the futility of aspirations for wholeness and completeness, progress through contradiction, the eventual unfolding of the good, the changing nature of truth, the importance of point of view in the evaluation of a person, event, or object,
the inadequacy of language to express truth. But Browning feared that the essential seriousness of Ogniben might be overlooked, and in one version of the play, he had the legate deliver “a huge kind of sermon” on “the belief in a future state [which] modifies every feeling derivable from this present life” (Kintner, 1:546, 2:579). Miss Barrett agreed that this was a felicitous omission, but Browning still felt that a “proper objection” could be made “to the immediate, first effect of the whole—its moral effect,—which is dependent on the contrary supposition of its being really understood, in the main drift of it” (Kintner, 1:455).

Hitherto, I believe, the poet would not have been so interested in the moral effect as the first effect. Now, however, he was unwilling to allow the morality of the work to emerge from an understanding of its irony. He therefore felt it necessary to have his spokesman define the moral boundaries of irony. Thus Ogniben praises “discovering much good on the worse side” but then goes on to say “that the same process should proportionately magnify and demonstrate to you the much more good on the better side!” Thus he approves that “a large nature should sympathize with every form of intelligence” but maintains that one should “preserve the proportions of [one’s] sympathy.” Thus he applauds the ability to “descry beauty in corruption where others see foulness only” but insists that one should also “see a redoubled beauty in the higher forms, where already everybody sees no foulness at all” (2. 461–75). In such passages Ogniben (as well as Browning) becomes more of a moralist than an ironist. He seems to change roles, which movement prompts Chiappino to ask: “Do you begin to throw off your mask?” (2. 594). Indeed, at the end he is not so much the man who loves “composing differences” (2. 108) by employing a kind of Socratic irony as the homilist who puts the finishing touch to a sermon on the text “Let who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (2. 653–54).

Ogniben’s rhetorical irony leads to an ending in which all loose strands are tied up. The lovers Luitolfo and Eulalia are reunited, and the deceiver departs “out of sight” (683). Power rests with Ogniben, who commands “unlimited obedience to
Rome's authority in my person" (600-601). Love and power are left in separate hands, but here there is no suggestion that, as in Colombe's Birthday, one without the other will be diminished. Luitolfo and Eulalia will live happily ever after, neither ever having wanted power in the first place; they are content to be "undivided, whatever be [their] fortune" (647-48). Love is enough. In the case of power, the former provost, who apparently had misused power, is overthrown; and its present representative is a benign and wise priest, for whom sexual love was never a question and whose last words are a benediction: "And now gives thanks to God, the keys of the Provost's Palace to me, and yourselves to profitable meditation at home." The sermon is ended; the play is fully enclosed.

Elizabeth Barrett was full of admiration for A Soul's Tragedy: "Why it is full of hope for both of us, to look forward & consider what you may achieve with that combination of authority over the reasons & the passions." She objected only that Ogniben seemed "too wise for a crafty worlding" (Kintner, 2:569). Clearly it was the thought and the morality of part two that appealed to her. It may or may not be that Browning gave it the strong moral twist at the end to please her. But it is evident that as he was bidding farewell to the formal drama he was becoming a poet less willing to allow his work to unfold in the same ironic fashion that had characterized his poetry since the time of Sordello. "If I had not known you so far THESE works might have been the better," Browning told his future wife. "If you take a man from prison and set him free..do you not probably cause a signal interruption to his previous all-ingrossing occupation, and sole labour of love, of carving bone-boxes, making chains of cherry-stones, and other such time beguiling operations—does he ever take up that business with the old alacrity?" His plays had, he says by implication, been but time-serving. Now he is ready for more serious enterprise, to begin "Ploughing, building (castles , no bone-boxes now)" (Kintner, 2:580).

One can hardly regret that Browning gave up writing formal drama. Indeed, one is inclined to view the plays as a distraction from what the poet should properly have been about—writing poems. For though there are some excellent parts in nearly every one of the seven plays, none of them—
am, of course, excluding *Pippa Passes*—is entirely successful. But the reason for their failure is not, I think, the one usually offered—that they are lacking in action or plot. This might have been a relevant objection in the early Victorian period, when audiences were yet unaccustomed to psychological action as the basic dramatic action. But nowadays, when Beckett’s and Pinter’s plays are standard pieces in the theatrical repertory everywhere, who cares about the kind of action, “Character in Action,” which Browning’s dramas so obviously and admittedly lack? No, this can no longer be a valid objection. What is wrong with them in my opinion is that they are cast in the wrong mold, tragedy.

As we have many times observed, Browning’s way of seeing things was essentially ironic—that is, seeing at least two, usually contradictory, sides of every question. Tragedy, on the other hand, demands that there be a way in which to view a man and his actions; its meaning is largely unproblematical, at least on the literal level of story and plot. Also, tragedy necessarily entails sedateness, a subordination of comic elements to a grave and solemn ending. Irony, however, calls for laughter, the laughter that results from the perception of the incongruity of things in a state of becoming. It may deal with serious matters, but in effect it is always comic.

Browning himself came to recognize that he could not fit his ironic view of life into a tragic mold. Arthur E. DuBois is right, I think, when he says that *A Soul’s Tragedy* is “a conscious rebellion against tragedy as a type of drama.” In that play the one who suffers the “tragedy,” Chiappino, is replaced as protagonist by the cosmic humorist, Ogniben, who changes the whole mode of the drama. Browning had, I believe, come finally to realize that his talent was for the human comedy. Had he not been disillusioned by the theater, its actors and managers, he might have become a great playwright. Had he not moved to Italy and had he continued writing for the stage, he might have given the English theater the kind of ironic comedies that it did not enjoy till Shaw appeared some fifty years later. Browning had all the qualifications—far more, in fact, than Shaw. He did not, alas, ever hit on the right theatrical form.