IN CASTING A BACKWARD GLANCE OVER Browning's earlier work, I want now to confront directly the problem that, I believe, lies at the heart of almost all commentary on the young Browning and that Philip Drew has articulated when asking "why Browning is alone among the poets of his century in adopting a dramatic form for the bulk of his work." The answer most frequently offered by his critics and biographers is that he was compelled by the fear of self-exposure to hide behind a dramatic mask and so protect himself from revelation of certain characterological defects. A second answer is that he wished to avoid the subjectivity that he saw as vitiating much Romantic poetry. A third answer is that the objectivity and impersonality provided by the dramatic mode were necessitated, in Browning's case as well as that of fellow poets, by the lack of an effective ethos that would admit personal assertion. There is no doubt an element of truth in all three answers. But I think there is still a better answer—namely, Browning was a dramatic poet because, unlike his contemporaries, he was essentially an ironist. If this sounds like question-begging, let me explain what I mean.

For Browning art is imperialistic: it aims to embrace and absorb everything; it is power. The artist "would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel all"; he wishes "to create, and rule, and call / Upon all things to minister to [him]" (Pauline, 275–78). Like Aprile he desires "to perfect and consummate all" (Paracelsus, 2.475) and like Sordello to have it "All at once" (Sordello, 2.626). Yet art is also love and evokes a contrary impulse: the desire to represent to others what the artist sees and feels, which means that the artist must subdue himself to that which can be represented. If he does not do this, then he will, like Aprile and Sordello, end up doing nothing. An artist who aspires to be a "whole poet" must be both a "seer" and a "fashioner" (Essay on Shelley).

Browning's art is therefore both egotistically sublime and
negatively capable, subjective and objective at once. "The world and all its action, as a show of thought," Walter Pater said of him, "that is the scope of his work." His art is the external medium into which the truths acquired by the soul have been objectified. It exists first for him and for his use. While ostensibly characterizing individuals of every type, it is actually the means by which the poet has defined himself. Art is, then, a mediation between the self and the infinite. Or to put it another way, it is the drama of the becoming soul.

The idea of the drama as the form capable of uniting the subjective and the objective modes of poetic faculty did not originate with Browning. Schlegel had called for a Universalpoesie that would join the opposites of lyric and epic, that would be epic in undertaking to mirror the whole world surrounding it but lyric in refracting the world through the medium of a single mind; but, he said, as "yet no form has thus far arisen appropriate to expressing the author's mind so perfectly, so that artists who just wanted to write have by coincidence described themselves" (Athenaeum Fragment No. 116). Henry Crabb Robinson did, however, specifically cite drama as the means by which the epic and lyric, the objective and subjective could be combined:

The epic is marked by this character of style,—that the poet presents his object immediately and directly, with a total disregard of his own personality. He is, as it were, an indifferent and unimpassioned narrator or chronicler. The opposite class of poetry is the lyric, in which the poet gives mainly objects as they are reflected in the mirror of his own individuality. These same classes, designated generally, as the objective and and subjective, were called by Schiller the naive and sentimental, and they have also been named the real and the ideal. In general, modern poets belong to the subjective class. The dramatic poet must unite the powers of both in an equal degree. In the plan of his drama, in the relation of the characters to each other, all in subordination to the purpose of the work, he must have the epic impartiality; but in the execution, he is lyric.

Other voices as well cried out during the 1830s for a poetry displaying the psychology of human character, a poetry that would inevitably have to be dramatic. But even though the idea did not originate with Browning,
he nevertheless was highly conscious of attempting something new. The note appended to *Pauline* speaks of the poem as a "singular" production in a new genre. The preface to *Paracelsus* calls that work "novel" in its genre and "difficult" in its form. The preface to *Strafford* refers to the play as following a new method of presentation of character and action. The narrator in the opening lines of *Sordello* represents himself as a maker of "quite new men" and a setter-forth of "unexampled themes." In the Advertisement to *Dramatic Lyrics*, the poet felt compelled to explain the novelty of the dramatic pieces of that volume. Throughout his poetry and letters of the period 1833–46, there is a consciousness of difference and distinction, of doing something new. It is no wonder that, because his was, as John Forster called it, "a new genius for dramatic poetry," his readers frequently found him obscure and unintelligible.

Dramatic poetry does not, of course, always take what Browning referred to as "the vulgar or more obvious form of drama,—scene & dialogue." It assumes, as we have noted, many forms. Once having determined that his poetry would be the drama of self-enactment, Browning had to search for those forms that would permit ever-fresh origination and display the continuing development of soul. Since every "performance" represents an advance in soul-making, the poet was under compulsion to discover new media for each successive "performance." Partly as the result of the drama, the dramatist was greater than his poem. As Sordello learned to his dismay, he could never achieve a poem that would contain all of him. Or as Browning said of himself, his poetry was far from being the "completest expression of my being" (Kintner, 2:725).

Art like other aspects of life must be viewed as a continuing struggle for freedom within form, as the artist seeking a progressive enfranchisement of his soul from limiting embodiments. And even though there is always an increasing ascendency of content over form, the artist must constantly search for media "answering to and indicative of the process of the informing spirit" (*Essay on Shelley*). Eventually, in the new kind of synthetist art envisioned in *Sordello*, there will be a "sympoetry" in which form will disappear almost entirely. This does not, however, mean the death of art, only an
increasing transparency of form. Browning's aesthetics as well as his metaphysics reflects a belief in the gradual evolution of soul, not to perfectability but to ever more advanced states.

It is this manifestation of his philosophy of becoming in drama that most obviously sets Browning off from his Romantic predecessors, whose greatest achievements were in the lyric mode. Where they sought for an organic form fully matching content, Browning always insists on the disequilibrium between the two. For him all embodiment is a type of evil in that it conceals and limits the good beneath: body, whether it be genre, verse form, language, or human corporeality, is the prison house of soul. Art represents the releasing of soul from body, but only into a less restrictive form—into a more comfortable temporary prison, as it were, that significantly is not fully enclosed. For Browning all life is a progressive struggle of the soul for freedom within form. This is why the drama of the soul is enacted in such different forms in Browning's earlier verse, why no other nineteenth-century poet employed so many various genres during a comparable thirteen-year period.

This revel of dramatic forms, to alter slightly a term used by Geoffrey Hartman, is matched in Browning's earlier work by a revelry of character portrayal. Seemingly so different in personality and in personal and historical circumstances, his characters nevertheless share certain common qualities. First, they are caught at moments of crisis in their lives, when their souls may advance or stand still. Second, they are conscious of their literary status, aware of being dramatis personae. Third, they court an ideal to which, however faulty it is shown to be, they for the most part remain steadfastly loyal. These characteristics combine to mold dramatic characters with whom we are asked to feel sorrow or joy but from whom we also are invited to detach ourselves because they are shown to be unworthy of our complete empathy. We see, in effect, two sides of Browning's characters; and furthermore, behind the dramatic form in which they are displayed, we also see the playwright, who manages—whether by form, as in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," or by symbol, as in "My Last Duchess," or by manner of narration, as in Sordello—to reveal himself as the maker of the proceedings.
In his forms and in his characters, then, Browning the ironist revels. It is, however, in his language and in his consideration of language, whether explicitly or implicitly, that he seems to revel most of all. For his works are not so much dramas as dramatic poetry. Ultimately he is less interested in both character in action and action in character than in the dramatic language that ultimately conveys both plot and character. What fascinates Browning is what his characters say and the way in which they say it. As he remarked to Elizabeth Barrett concerning *Luria*, “Whatever comes of it, the ‘aside,’ the bye-play, the digression, will be the best, and the true business of the piece” (Kintner, 1:411). And as George Bernard Shaw observed years later, “Browning, when the mere action of his plays flags, lifts and prolongs apparently exhausted situations by bursts of poetry.” Not what his characters do or even what they are—these are of less interest to the poet than what they say. And this is because he himself was always aware that in letting them speak he was in fact speaking for them, using them to define and advance himself. “Energetic extroversion,” Peter Conrad remarks of the Romantic Ironist, “is his mask for moody introversion.” The mannered interruption of dialogue in the plays, the constant return to the nature of language in *Sordello*, the frequent allusions to documents and scripts, the fragmented speech of the monologists, the undulated speech of Pauline’s lover and Paracelsus, the infinite deferrals and reconsiderations of decisions and actions—all point to Browning’s central concern with language and its ironies. For Browning language is re-presentation of imaging; it is “the stuff / That held the imaged thing”; and he laments its inability to do more than re-present, mediate, or substitute, to allow scarcely “a tithe / To reach the light” (*Sordello*, 2.570–73). As an embodiment language inevitably conceals that which it pretends to reveal. Language, in short, is a phenomenal system that at best permits hints, tokens, and broken glances of the noumenal world. Here also Browning is in sharp disagreement with his Romantic predecessors who believed, to quote Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*, that “to be poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relations subsisting, first between existence
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and perception and secondly between perception and expression."²²

In pointing out Browning's difference from the English Romantics in his insistence on the dramatic mode and in his theory and practice of form and of language, I do not, however, wish to represent Browning as one who was totally unlike his immediate predecessors. As we have seen, he conceived of poetry as an engine ever in process of construction and dismantlement. Like the Romantic poets he believed in the creative ego, which employs a constructive mind to shape chaotic material. But where for the Romantics the ego is a manifestation of the Absolute Ego—Nature, Mind, Power, Being—for Browning the ego is self-creating. Like the Romantics he makes meaning by reference to transcendental categories. But where they appealed to a stable transcendental order, Browning recognizes only a transcendental process by which man is still becoming man and God still becoming God. Where romantic poetry is allegorical, visionary, and mythic, Browning's early work glorifies self-activity and finds meaning in the empirical and in time.

It would be wrong to consider Browning's as a rejection rather than a revision of Romantic metaphysical and aesthetic modes, for he remains a seer, a "subjective" poet. Like the Romantics he places his faith in what Wallace Stevens calls "the magnificent cause of being, / The imagination, the one reality / In this imagined world" ("Another Weeping Woman"). He exalts philosophy and literature as authentic discourses. But he is also a maker and fashioner, an "objective" poet. He is a maker-see—the "whole" poet. He does not reject Romantic idealism, but he injects into it a strong strain of realism.²³ Although, again like Wallace Stevens, he insists that "things are as I think they are / And say they are," he nevertheless maintains that "I am a native in this world / And think in it as a native thinks" ("The Man with the Blue Guitar"), his "instinct for earth" as great as his "instinct for heaven" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). Browning insists on the actual and the temporal: his subject is men and women in history, characters like those in Pippa Passes who can change their minds and their whole ways of life in a
moment. As the poet said of himself in later life, “By a law of the association of ideas—contraries come into the mind as often as similarities—and the peace and solitude readily called up the notion of what would most jar them.” For him and for his characters, each moment is pregnant with possibilities. This does not mean, however, that they live in possibility, which would be the very kind of inaction Browning so often deplores; on the contrary, the characters whom we are asked to approve—Paracelsus, for example—act decisively, sin boldly. Their chief problem lies in determining which course of action to follow. What is needed, as Browning says in *Sordello*, is some “moon” or “star” to light the way.

Now, it is his conception of this “moon” that makes Browning so difficult to come to grips with. What does it mean? Or to put the question within the framework I have been using, what does it indicate about his irony? By way of uncovering the answer, let me briefly consider Browning in light of what I understand to be the two chief contemporary theories of literary irony. The first, championed by Wayne C. Booth, insists that irony is rhetorically functional and that beneath every ironic surface there is to be discovered a stable center of meaning. The other, proposed by Paul de Man, maintains that the interpretation of an ironic text is impossible because there is no stable center of meaning, “meaning” being an illusion of the conscious mind imprisoned in its own linguistic system but desiring release into “metaphysics.” Where Booth reconstructs, de Man deconstructs. Where then is the young Browning?

The answer is, I believe, in neither one camp nor the other but in both. For Browning sees each separately obviating possibility—the possibility of becoming. When modern deconstructionists insist on the death of meaning, they reify a meaning that precludes others. And when reconstructionists declare that a statement of meaning may be recovered, they too lapse into dogma and affirm meaning as something fixed and final. What concerns Browning is not so much meaning as the possibility of meaning. As Mrs. Orr remarked concerning his religious belief, it “held a saving clause, which removed it from all dogmatic grounds of controversy: the more definite or
concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no finality for even his own mind; they represented for him an absolute truth in contingent relations to it" (Life, p. 436). For him meaning is neither absent nor fixed: it is always becoming, realizing itself and being realized in different styles, forms, and perspectives. Which is to say, it is provisional—a fiction perhaps, but an enabling fiction, a guiding “moon” or “star.” That is, I think, Browning’s chief semantic irony—one we have noted in all his work from Pauline to the last of the Bells and Pomegranates—and from it all his other semantic ironies spring. Meaning in Browning’s earlier poetry is nearly always problematical, and to appreciate it we as readers must be extraordinarily agile.

As he was bringing the Bells and Pomegranates series to a close in 1846, Browning was about to begin a new kind of life—in marriage and in Italy. “My whole scheme of life was long ago calculated,” he wrote to his bride-to-be, “and it supposed you, the finding such an one as you, utterly impossible” (Kintner, 1:193). But having found her, he must change, in many ways. As for poetry, “I mean to take your advice and be quiet awhile and let my mind get used to its new medium of sight—, seeing all things thro’ you: and then, let all I have done be the prelude and the real work begin” (Kintner, 1:455). Seeing all things through Elizabeth’s eyes would indeed make a difference. It can, I believe, be plausibly argued that, with the exception of Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, the poems of his middle years prior to The Ring and the Book are the least characteristic of this poet dedicated to the philosophy of becoming. It would be possible, I think, to maintain that Browning’s marriage to Elizabeth Barrett marked a period when the poet contented himself, artistically at least, more with being than becoming. But whatever the case, the fact remains that during the years of his marriage Browning wrote less and in a less formally experimental fashion than at any other period of his life. Where during the thirteen years prior to his marriage he published twelve separate volumes of verse, during the fifteen years of his married life he published only three.

Browning did not cease to be an ironist during his middle
years, but his irony is more limited. Seeing through his wife's eyes necessarily gave him a new perspective: he became more conscious of his "mission of humanity" (Kintner, 1:493). I do not mean to imply that the great monologues of the 1850s and 60s are reducible to their moral content, but I do think it fair to say that they have more moral design upon the reader than do the earlier poems. Admittedly there are ironies galore in "Cleon," "Karshish," "Abt Vogler," and the others, but they are ironies that by and large point to some fixed meaning. Only later, when he returns to England, does the old sense of irony return strongly, never so wonderfully zanily as in the case of Sordello but boldly and paradoxically nevertheless. Where during the years of his wife's influence he worked mainly with one form, the dramatic monologue, upon coming back to London he began again the formal experimentation of the ironist who, aware of the principle of becoming and the inadequacy of any form to serve for more than one occasion, always seeks new vehicles to embody new ideas. The Ring and the Book reintroduces radically ironic notions of art that continue in the poet's work, with some fluctuation, until his death in 1889.²⁷

Being an ironist does not, of course, preclude being a moralist. As I have tried to demonstrate, from the beginning Browning's earlier work is nearly always concerned with moral problems. But they are not rendered as such; it is the moral drama—the dialogue—that he invites us to witness and enjoy. He does not, like Shelley, present us with a world of perfect order where nature is redeemed. There is nothing in him of an apocalyptic imagination that is unleashed in visions, dreams, trance, or madness, as in Tennyson, say. The young Browning is more like Balzac in that he pressures the phenomenon to make it yield meaning. His historical characters, for example, are nothing—or almost nothing—until he resuscitates them, molds them anew, as he says in Sordello. What he aims to do is to deal with fact—to turn, twist, contort it, if need be—and make the fact yield the vision and thereby persuade us that fact and vision are so interconnected that they cannot be distinguished. That is the essence of Browning's drama—the drama of the body and the soul—and it is ultimately, if inci-
dentally, a moral drama. All life, the young Browning would have us see, all life is significant. And it is the function of the maker-see to uncover it, to make us experience the becoming of an object, to defamiliarize the object dulled for us by habitualization, by lifting it out of the field of ordinary perception and placing it within a network of relationships that constitute the work of art. His instruction to us is that which Henry James offered to young novelists: “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.” And he does this by being both “subjective” and “objective”—a “whole poet”—in a word, an ironist.