Strategies of Discrepancy

The preceding chapter concludes that portion of the study which presents documents containing raw material for *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*. At this point it may be useful to stand back a moment to examine some of the clarifications of theme* and structure that may be gained by comparing the poem with material from which it was derived. As must already be apparent, in Browning's version of this history there are many omissions and distortions of this material, large and small. Some of these merely help simplify a complex narrative, but others contribute to the creation of effects that often differ in important ways from those made by the original documents in the case. Thus, as in any source study, these documents can be very useful in suggesting what themes the writer had determined that his material would convey, especially since, in this particular poem, so much depends on Browning's insistence on the strictness of his fidelity to publicly verifiable facts. Given that reiterated insistence, he presumably made any departures from those public facts only with a certain reluctance.

There already has been cited, in the Introduction, a passage from one of Browning's letters explaining that "the facts are so exactly put down" in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* that he was required to change the names of persons and places "in order to avoid the possibility of prosecution for Libel—that is, telling the exact truth" (p. 16). Indeed, he later went so far as to draw up an "Advertisement," "prepared, one may assume, as a foreword,"* in which he defended all the material in the poem as "depending absolutely on public authority." This document, Browning's
most unequivocal statement of his strict adherence to the historical facts as he found them given, "as they were presented to and decided upon by the Court of the Country, as they exist in print and as they may be procured by anybody," is given in full on page three of this volume.

In the poem itself this note of factual demonstration is struck from the very beginning, as Browning and his lady friend tour the Tailleville district of the Normandy coast, long before he even starts to tell the story of the Mellerios. He points out in the distance the tower of la Délivrande, which "you frontnow, lady!" (1.436). The crown recently placed on the statue of the Virgin, "you must see!" (1.512). When they come to "reconnoitring" (1.563) the Mellerio chateau, "Let us complete our survey, go right round / The place" (1.695-96). When the tale itself is finally reached, Browning's recital is heavily laced with such comments as: "I find [this account of Antonio's youthful escapades] deposed / At [Caen], confirmed in his own words" (2.316-17). So "runs on the confidence, / Poor fellow, that was read in open Court" (2.395-96). And when he reports the statements Mellerio made after burning off his hands, "I quote / The words, I cannot give the smile" (3.457-58). There are many more such instances of claims to literal accuracy, but these examples will serve to illustrate Browning's repeated concern to be perceived as consistently retailing demonstrable historical fact. A further guarantee of his objectivity is his confession in book two that his researches have occasionally been confusing: Mellerio's letters discuss Mme Debacker's early history "in a style / To puzzle Court Guide students, much more me" (2.547-48). This remark confirms both Browning's amateur status as an investigator and his claim to have no access to any privileged information. Perhaps his most useful tactic in this regard is his ostentatious honesty in clearly labeling certain occasional passages of subjective interpretation: "What follows you are free to disbelieve: / It may be true or false . . . (3.217-18); "I give it you as mere conjecture, mind!" (3.255). The effect of such scrupulous asides is to suggest that wherever they do not occur the narrative is strictly objective, and that there the reader is not free to disbelieve what follows. This implication is not true, to a remark-
able degree, and a survey of the more significant departures from his original shows that Browning was often prepared to distort his raw material as much as necessary, in order to force it to yield the themes he wished it to, in spite of his recurrent claims to complete factuality. The most important discrepancies, which this chapter will examine, naturally occur in the presentation of the three main figures: Mellerio and the two personifications of his emotional dilemma—Mme Debacker and the Convent of la Délivrande.

ANTONIO MELLERIO (LEONCE MIRANDA)

With regard to Mellerio, Browning's major alterations of original material relate to his determination for this character to embody one of his favorite themes. Mellerio, like Norbert or Clive, is to be an example of moral evolution at work, displaying the progressive clarification of a moral issue until the point is reached where further ponderings, shifts, and compromises are no longer possible, and decisive action must be taken. In this instance the struggle occurs between Mellerio's romantic affections and his religious convictions, symbolized throughout the poem by the flowery turf and stark towers of the poem's subtitle. In Browning's view Mellerio had realized from his earliest years that it was the goal of his life eventually to prefer the ultimate truths of religion to the transient pleasures of this world, but he was so torn between these alternatives that his entire life, up to its last day, was a series of various efforts to reconcile the two so as to avoid having to choose between them. To Browning this evasiveness is a basic human folly: "Life's business [is] just the terrible choice," as the Pope remarks in The Ring and the Book (10.1237). So he applauds Antonio's final leap as being at last a courageous, if misguided, commitment to a moral choice.

Consequently, Browning's theme was well served by having Mellerio's entire life perceived as a coherent sequence of lessons leading up to that culminating leap, but the truth is that to impose this pattern on the events of Mellerio's life, as recorded in the original documents, required Browning to distort the testimony his source material offered him. The events themselves, "reported in the newspaper" (4.31) as
Browning boasts he found them, simply do not warrant much confidence in the interpretation he wished to give them. For instance, it was useful for Browning to have Mellerio's cold bath in the Seine, in October 1867, play a role much more important than even the heirs had hoped to establish. They only sought to trace in that episode "the first symptoms of that unsoundness of mind of which the last stage would be suicide" (p. 41); but Browning saw it as showing Mellerio remorsefully ending the thoughtless, irresponsible phase of his life by seeking an easy escape from his mother's reproaches. In Browning's hands the bath became nothing less than attempted suicide itself, a "remedy / For fever, in a cold Autumnal flow" (3.109);

"Go and be rid of memory in a bath!"
Craftily whispered [the Devil.] Who besets the ear
On such occasions.

(3.110-12)

Browning's version is demonstrably inconsistent with the literal sense of the documentation at several points. As regards Mellerio's bath being a response to his mother's reproaches for having restored Tailleville so expensively, Browning there illegitimately elevated to fact an unsupported allegation of the heirs, even though, as the defense pointed out, "Letters submitted to the Court [by the defendants] show that Mme Mellerio approved both the plans and the expense; on one occasion she even reproached Antonio for the apparent diffidence with which he asked her for money!" (pp. 54, 102). And as regards the claim that the bath was itself a suicide attempt, that is so implausible that the heirs could not bring themselves even to allege it, though if they could have, it would have been ideally suited to their case. Further, although Browning does mention that in the course of Mellerio's recovery he lay "Raving" (3.115), he did not include the most dramatic moment of that episode, when Mellerio "enter[ed] his jewelry shop wrapped in a sheet like a cloak, with his head circled by a handkerchief like a crown, raving of his coming glories" (p. 84). The ludicrous egotism implied by these details is very much at odds with Browning's interpretation of the event as Mellerio's first despondent
STRATEGIES OF DISCREPANCY

solution to his increasingly painful inability to choose between the contradictory values symbolized by his mother and his mistress. To have included them would have made that interpretation seem painfully farfetched.

After this crisis, according to Browning, Mellerio's life divided itself into two stages of increasingly enlightened moral growth. His first attempt at resolving his dilemma was to ignore the claims of religion entirely, "To build up, independent of the towers, / A durable pavilion o'er the turf" (3.680-81). When this plan "issued in [the] disaster" (3.682) of the destruction of his hands, Browning sees Mellerio as having learned a valuable lesson, "By process I respect if not admire" (3.657), and as turning with renewed determination and increased insight to his second "experiment" (3.1057), an effort to harmonize the two claims, "by tunnel, or else gallery, / . . . And never try complete abandonment / Of one or other" (3.684-88). This last phase of Mellerio's education would end in the leap from the belvedere, and for that leap to be positively climactic, Browning needed Mellerio's last two years to be seen as increasingly vigorous and healthy, so that Mellerio could begin his soliloquy on the belvedere with the joyous observation that he was then "In prime of life, perfection of estate / Bodily [and] mental" (4.36^-37). The problem for an objective reporter was that though Mellerio had undoubtedly made a complete recovery—"It is truly a resurrection!" (p. 72), marveled the attorney for the convent—he equally undoubtedly also experienced many episodes of physical feebleness and mental "eccentricity" (p. 49). These it suited Browning's purpose to gloss over, thus giving in his version the impression that Mellerio's physical and mental health was much more consistently vigorous than the documents themselves suggest.

For instance, soon after his recovery Mellerio sold to his cousins by auction his share of the jewelry business. In the trial it was frequently stressed, and fully acknowledged, that Mellerio good-naturedly gave his cousins every possible advantage in these negotiations. Not only did he publicly stipulate a minimum price of 200,000 francs so as to keep other bidders away, but he also permitted the cousins to be the only assessors of the property they were buying, and he further
ROUGHB IN BRUTAL PRINT

granted a delay of payment of the principal for 10 years (for
details see pp. 57, 73-74, 106). Though a good case might
easily be made for shady dealing on the part of the cou­
sins, Mellerio himself was extremely generous. But to avoid,
I take it, any hint of lingering sentimental weakness in
his hero, Browning created for Mellerio's role in the sale a
fierce aggressiveness fully the equal of his cousins'. In the
poem, without the slightest justification, Browning had
Mellerio insist that "the price [be] adjudged / By experts I
shall have assistance from" (3.598-99), and concluded the ep­
isode by remarking that the jewelry business was eventually
"bought by them and sold by him on terms . . . might serve
'twixt wolf and wolf,' / Substitute 'bit and clawed' for
'signed and sealed' " (3.624-26). Where the original event
could legitimately have been taken as implying for Mellerio
a role of passive compliance, Browning showed only an im­
mediate and entire resumption of alertness and energy.

In the poem this depiction of undimmed intelligence and
energy continues unabated to the end of Mellerio's life, in
spite of the court's observation in its judgment that Mellerio
in his last two years was "a man who all agree was extremely
weakened in both body and mind" (p. 121). Of all the various
eccentricities attributed to Mellerio in the suit, only one, his
journey to la Délivrande on his knees, found its way into the
poem, where for all its peculiarity it was merely labeled an
instance of Mellerio's "Spiritual effort" (3.1004) and "incess­
sant . . . devotion" (3.1020). "According to his lights, I
praise the man" (3.1019), says Browning; and Mellerio's in­
creasingly vivid awareness of the religious dimension of life
is the key, in Browning's view, to understanding his climac­
tic leap from the belvedere. Whereas the defense dismissed
Mellerio's death as a simple accident and the plaintiffs in­
sisted it was lunatic suicide, Browning discovered a typically
perverse interpretation, in which he accepted the hostile
premises of the heirs but used them to arrive at a radically
different conclusion. Agreeing with the heirs that Mellerio's
motive was an absurdly exaggerated religious conviction,
Browning nevertheless saw that act not as the final proof of
idiocy but as the best and sanest gesture of Mellerio's whole
life.

134
At any rate, I see no slightest sign
Of folly (let me tell you in advance),
Nothing but wisdom meets me manifest
In the procedure of the Twentieth Day
Of April, 'Seventy,—folly's year in France.

Browning saw the leap as a courageous, even rational, solution to Mellerio's arrival at the tormented conviction that the basic cause of his suffering was the inadequacy of his faith in the Virgin's infinite love. "Therefore, to prove indubitable faith" (4.264) in her forgiveness, he jumped, so that she might perform the miracle of permitting him to fly from the château to the church of la Délivrande. And Browning wholeheartedly approved: Mellerio was not mad but sane, I say.

Such being the conditions of his life,
Such end of life was not irrational.
Hold a belief, you only half-believe,
With all-momentous issues either way,—
And I advise you imitate this leap,
Put faith to proof, be cured or killed at once!

Now, it is true, of course, that this interpretation is presented not as a general consensus but as Browning's own private inference from the public record; and I think it is one of the major themes of this work, as it was for The Ring and the Book, that it is in fact possible for an imaginative sympathy to have valid insights into "pure, crude fact" (Ring, 1.85), as the Old Yellow Book was there described. But the success of the demonstration of that faculty very much depends, as it did in The Ring and the Book, on the reader's sense that the narrator is reliably objective; and in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, as we have begun to see, that reliability is much more a calculated impression than an actual fact. In this climactic leap, for example, Browning did not faithfully reproduce its circumstances, but instead carefully stage-managed the details of the incident so as to increase the plausibility of his own interpretation. For instance, in keeping with his emphasis on Mellerio's vigorous mental and
physical health, Browning endowed Mellerio with a mood on his last day so flamboyantly exuberant as to make any suggestion of suicide completely unlikely. The documents agree (pp. 46, 60) that Mellerio had just ordered a carriage for a morning drive, but in Browning's version this drive in a carriage became a ride on the horse, and not on just any horse, but "a wild young horse to exercise, / And teach the way to go and pace to keep" (3.1072-73). The newspaper accounts assume that Mellerio went up to the belvedere after bidding farewell to Mme Debacker while the carriage was being prepared. This simple action became in Browning's hands an elated "clearing, two and two, / The staircase-steps" with "elastic foot" (3.1083-84, 4.6), after closing Mme Debacker's door "considerately" (3.1081), presumably so as not to imply any manic lack of control.

After such an introduction, any reasonable reader can only agree with Browning that suicide must seem out of the question. As for what really happened on the balcony, in the actual trial there appeared a very interesting piece of evidence that Browning chose to omit completely. According to Mme Debacker's attorney,

The balustrade was 1.03 meters higher than the floor of the belvedere. There has been testimony that on that day a lead roller, 8 centimeters in diameter, had been left on the platform, inside the balustrade, on the side from which Antonio fell. What happened there? Did Antonio wish to stand on this roller, with nothing higher than the balustrade of 95 centimeters (103 minus 8) for support? Did he lean forward too far, to see the carriage or some other object of his attention? And then—tall and strong, but with both hands mutilated—did he lose his balance? This is the most plausible explanation. There were no witnesses. (P. 61).

The presence of the roller certainly raises awkward questions that can never arise in Browning's version, since it does not appear there. And as for whether or not there were witnesses, Browning subtly altered the evidence of Richer, the gardener, who testified to the police at the time that, "while working in the park about 60 meters from the château, he heard a thud and then saw in the garden walk the body of Mellerio, whose skull was cracked; he thought Mellerio probably fell accidentally" (p. 166).

So, as Mme Debacker's attorney men-
tioned above, there were no witnesses to the actual event. But in Browning's poem, "A gardener who watched, at work the while / Dibbling a flower-bed for geranium-shoots, / Saw the catastrophe" (4.342-44). The difference, though slight, is important because if the gardener really had been watching the whole episode, then what he saw, according to Browning, was "A sublime spring from the balustrade" (4.338, italics mine). This phrase could only describe a deliberate leap, hardly an awkward accidental tumble over the balustrade, so that Browning's version of Richer's testimony has a shifted focus that effectively denies the possibility of accident that the original so strongly implies. The opinion of the gardener and the lawyer—that Mellerio's death was most probably accidental—is confirmed in the impartial summary of the public prosecutor: "The circumstances of the site, the maimed condition of the man, the possibility of vertigo—all combine to make an accident extremely plausible. Though indeed, considering all the possibilities it would be foolhardy to claim certain knowledge one way or another" (p. 102). In Browning's version, although he kept unaltered most of the elements of this episode, which is the keystone of both his poem's structure and its theme, many of the circumstantial details that seem to corroborate his interpretation so effectively he either invented or obtained by distorting his original material. And since without these details his tone of conviction would often seem willfully capricious, it depends for its full impact on the reader's confidence in exactly this fidelity to factual detail that a comparison with that original material shows that it does not have.

MME DEBACKER—ANNA DE BEAUPRE
(MME MULHAUSEN—CLARA DE MILLEFLEURS)

Considering how frequently its tone is one of jocular discursiveness, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* keeps a remarkably sharp and steady focus on its theme. Every detail relates to the contradiction in Mellerio's character, and the whole poem comes to center on the dramatic leap that resolves those contradictions. The figure of Mme Debacker, as she appears in the poem, provides a good illustration of Browning's concentration on the issues at stake in Mellerio's life, because there every trait in her character is made to con-
tribute to her role as a foil to Mellerio's wavering and conflicting loyalties. In Browning's hands she is overwhelmingly single-minded and self-centered. Like a grub whose only mission in life is to become a butterfly, a grub who has been

Born, bred with just one instinct,—that of growth,—
Her quality was, caterpillar-like,
To ail-unerringly select a leaf
And without intermission feed her fill. . . .

(4.783-86)

Joining the cousins in condemning her as a complete hypocrite, Browning doubts that Mm Debacker herself believed at all in the religious practices she participated in with Mellerio:

What
She did believe in, I as little doubt,
Was—[Anna's] self's own birthright to sustain
Existence, grow from grub to butterfly,
Upon unlimited [Mellerio]-leaf. . . .

(4.844-48)

Still, "Of the masks / That figure in this little history, / She only has a claim to my respect" (4.740-42), and what Browning most respects in her is the strength of will with which she pursued her goal, however "inferiorly proposed" (4.762) that goal may have been. It is a familiar theme in Browning's verse, dating back to "The Statue and the Bust" and beyond: his admiration of anyone who has the courage of his conviction, no matter how warped—"Though the end in sight was a vice, I say" ("The Statue and the Bust," 1. 248). For Browning, Mme Debacker serves two major thematic purposes: as an instance of calculated concentration of purpose, in contrast to Mellerio's frantic indecision, and as an instance of a narrow and unscrupulous self-interest, in contrast to Mellerio's conflicting and generous affections.

When this rather sinister figure is compared with that which emerges from the original documents, it appears that in order to fit Mme Debacker into his theme Browning was unfairly hard on her. In the documents the most striking impression Mme Debacker makes is of an aloof dignity, an im-
penetrability that even Mellerio remarked on in his famous letter to Dr. Pasquier of 10 August 1869, cited in the court's formal judgment: "Neither you, nor I, nor anyone sees into her heart" (p. 121). This sense of her remoteness may be the source of Browning's comment that, when he happened one day to come across Mme Debacker in person, she was so "colorless" and "featureless" that "The whole effect amounts with me to—blank! / I never saw what I could less describe" (1.842-47). But when he came to write the poem, he found something to describe by including as established facts many of the allegations made against her in the trial, even though not one of them was ever proved. The portrait of Mme Debacker offered by Browning in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country as an objective record is, in fact, to suit his own private purposes, largely a duplication of the caricature offered by the Mellerio heirs in the trial to suit their own private purposes.

For instance, in the trial it was undisputed that, before she met Mellerio, Mme Debacker had lived in London with her husband, an unsuccessful tailor, and had subsequently returned alone to Paris "because he would have exploited her beauty" (p. 40). But the heirs went on to allege that she then took up the career of a courtesan, being "first kept by a M. de Mongino" (p. 40), whom she left only when she found more tempting prey in Mellerio. This charge was then indignantly denied by Mme Debacker's attorney as an "outrageous . . . slander" (p. 66). The burden of proof would seem to lie with the heirs, but no evidence whatever was submitted on this point by either side—there was just the charge and then the flat denial. But although it was an entirely unsupported allegation, Browning retailed it as plain fact. He found the idea of Mme Debacker's prostitution doubly useful, as implying not only that she was willing to go to any extreme to provide luxurious comfort for herself but also that her husband's insult must have made her feel more affronted in "her rights / To wifely independence, then as wronged / Otherwise by the course of life proposed" (2.649-51), since on her return to Paris she is said to have adopted exactly the course she had repudiated. Thus, this blot on her character served to suggest both characteristics Browning wished her to dis-
play— independent willpower and calculated concern for self.

The next incident in which Mme Debacker's role in the poem differs significantly from her role in the original documents concerns the matter of her separation from her husband. In Browning's version it is quite simple: when M. Debacker became a fashionable and wealthy tailor, he wished to prevent his wife from claiming her share of her husband's income and so deposed his "complaint of wrong" (2.880) to obtain a decree of separation. Although the narration takes about eighty lines, the brunt of its emphasis is all on how embarrassing the whole affair was for Mellerio—a "splash / Into the mid-shame" (2.903-4), a "rough but wholesome shock" (2.827) undergone for Mme Debacker's sake. She herself is nearly absent, visible only as a cause of scandal and humiliation. But in the accounts of the trial, it is made clear that the reason for M. Debacker's action was that he had formed a liaison with a Mile Viel, as Mme Debacker had with Mellerio, and he now wanted his way made legally clear to arranging a financial settlement with her (p. 53). Thus, morally he was as guilty as his wife; but in nineteenth-century France an adulterous husband could only be fined, and then only if he introduced his partner into the conjugal house, whereas an adulterous wife ran the risk of imprisonment. He was, in effect, blackmailing Mme Debacker into renouncing her share of her husband's new fortune by threatening her with charges of adultery. So actually she was something of a victim in this sordid affair, but in simplifying his account Browning omitted every circumstance that might possibly have created sympathy for her. Her attorney, for instance, pointed out that "there were more than 100,000 francs involved in this sacrifice, because M. Debacker was already in the full flush of prosperity. But she chose to stay with Antonio, whose father, mother, and brother were at that time all still alive. It certainly cannot have been greed that guided her" (p. 53). The remoteness of Mme Debacker's prospects of inheritance is obscured in Browning, where he implies that the (undated) episode concerning her husband occurred after the deaths of both Mellerio's father and his brother.
Then, in order to reinforce the idea that Mme Debacker's overriding concern throughout her life with Mellerio had been to protect her own source of sustenance, Browning gave the impression, through details that his original did not contain, that Mme Debacker herself was the indirect initiator of all Mellerio's many activities, keeping him harmlessly occupied through tasks "I used to busy you about, / And make believe you worked for my surprise!" (4.460-61). Even the elaborate restoration of the château is presented as work "I made you build, / And think an inspiration of your own" (4.457-58). Also, the heirs had unsuccessfully claimed that Mme Debacker dominated Mellerio completely, tyrannizing over him and forcing him to do her will; Browning was more subtle, but the effect is similar. He made Mme Debacker seem condescending, manipulative, and occasionally even sinister, as in the insistence that bequeathing Tailleville to the Convent of la Délivrande had been originally her idea: "Hers was the instigation—none but she / . . . begged and prayed / That, when no longer she could supervise / The House, it should become a Hospital" (1.805, 814-16). This insinuation is of a piece with the heirs' allegation that Mme Debacker callously exploited Mellerio's religious sentiments, "us[ing] the name of a Convent of holy maidens . . . to gain control over Antonio for her own profit and to disguise and protect the testament by the inclusion of respectable legatees who thus would also find themselves interested parties" (p. 90). This allegation was rejected—there was not even any evidence submitted to support it—but Browning included it anyway, with all its implications of calculated hypocrisy on Mme Debacker's part, and then presumed to "praise / Her forethought which prevented leafless stalk / Bestowing any hoarded succulence" (4.852-54) on the undeserving cousins.

Two other incidents in the poem that imply Mme Debacker's brazen acquisitiveness were also fabricated. They are both highly dramatic, and therefore appealing to a dramatic poet, but neither can actually have occurred. The first concerns Mme Debacker's alleged crow of triumph—"I have him I!"—on being reconciled to Mellerio after the mutilation of his hands. The heirs contended that Mme Debacker leaped
into Mellerio's carriage as he was leaving a relative's home one day and carried him off. The next day, they continued, Mellerio brought Morel, the faithful family agent, to Mme Debacker's house to be told about the pair's new plans, and Mme Debacker was said to have sneered at the annuity the family had earlier offered her as a settlement, crying, "I have him!" (Je le tiens!" [p. 45]). In rebuttal the defense labeled the entire episode a "fiction" (p. 65), claiming that Mellerio had independently appeared one day at Mme Debacker's house, and pointed out in support of their defense that if Mme Debacker actually had been so vindictive, "if Morel had heard any such thing, he would hardly have sent her his compliments in a letter to Antonio a few days later" (p. 66). The court, in its judgment, found this alleged remark of Mme Debacker's to be "completely implausible" (p. 124), because none of the plaintiffs "could explain why [Morel], who should have been outraged by her disgraceful remark, then asked in his letters to Antonio that his appreciation be forwarded to Anna for her devoted care, and sent her his best regards" (p. 124). Nevertheless, Browning included the speech verbatim, without any hint of its dubious authenticity, and even enlarged the putative audience from one single servant to the entire assembled family, so that the implausible gesture of defiance became a ceremonial declaration of war.

The other incident that Browning provided to display Mme Debacker's strength of will is her climactic tirade following Mellerio's death. This long speech, together with Browning's interpretative reaction, is the last major section of the poem, followed only by one hundred lines of quick conclusion. In this scene Mme Debacker faces the cousins, who have come to claim their inheritance, and reveals to them that Mellerio has left everything to la Delivrande, with a life-interest for herself. Finally, as "laugh grew frown, and frown grew terrible" (4.683), "shriek[ing]" (4.684) "Vituperative[ly]" (4.716), she ends by denouncing the cousins' selfish hypocrisy. This explosive culmination is Mme Debacker's only occasion of self-defense in the poem, and although Browning's subsequent commentary on her gradually cools, he does at this point approve of her as she "stands in pride of place" (4.737). But although a good deal
of what Mme Debacker says was paraphrased from her attorney's arguments in the accounts of the trial, the circumstances of the event as Browning so dramatically pictured it are far from the literal truth: what actually happened, when the cousins confronted Mme Debacker after Mellerio's death, was a prolonged negotiation, "which aimed at the avoidance of the [imminent] lawsuit by mutual concession" (p. 122). Mme Debacker signed a document acknowledging "some acts of eccentricity on Antonio's part" (p. 49), and in return she was offered a life estate in Tailleville plus an annuity of 12,000 francs. She demanded 15,000 francs, which the heirs at first refused, but they later grew anxious enough to consent to a subsequent demand for 18,000. Thus, the case would never have come to trial at all if M. Debacker, who was legally required to authorize his wife's litigation, had then not refused to agree to an annuity of less than 25,000 francs for her (p. 49). So the case finally did go to court, but only after this prolonged series of negotiations, which hardly suggests the staunchly righteous confidence Mme Debacker was made to display in the inflammatory scene that Browning invented for her in his poem.

On the whole, Browning's attitude toward Mme Debacker as she appears in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country is a curious mixture of distaste for her unconventional sexual morality and admiration for her strong-minded independence. The attitudes are familiar ones to students of Browning: his relationship with Elizabeth Barrett is only the most prominent example of his tendency to prudish passivity where women were concerned, and in his poetry Pompilia is only the most obvious instance of his adoration of ideal strength and purity of character. In Mme Debacker's case, his insistent excuse for dwelling at such length on her flaws of character is that, after all, the material is a matter of public record:

Would I re-tell this story of your woes,
Would I have heart to do you detriment
By pinning all this shame and sorrow plain
To that poor chignon . . .

. . . . . .
But that men read it, rough in brutal print,
As two years since some functionary's voice
Rattled all this—and more by every much—
Into the ear of vulgar Court and crowd?

(2.681-89)

But as with Mellerio himself, the traits that Browning apparently wished Mme Debacker to present most clearly cannot be found, in anything like the clarity he suggests, in the historical documents from which he so often professes to be drawing them.

NOTRE DAME DE LA DELIVRANDE (THE RAVISSANTE)

The third and last topic to be considered here is the role played in this poem by the institutions—the church and, to a lesser degree, the law. In his admiration of the individual who single-mindedly pursues his own truth as he sees it, Browning, like his early idol Shelley before him, consistently disparaged a weak reliance on convention, reserving an especially fierce disdain for social structures that have compromised an original impulse of idealism by becoming complacent bastions of the status quo. In *The Ring and the Book*, the judgments of the various officials of the church and the court are so distorted by myopia and selfish interest that they actually contribute to the catastrophe by their inability to transcend a petty insistence on conventional regulation. Only the saintly Pope has both the insight to perceive the subtle truths that elude the institutional machinery and the integrity to act decisively on that insight without concern for his personal advantage. In *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* Browning once again set out to re-create a historical event that would display in life one of his favorite literary themes—the various modes of inadequacy in institutionalized approaches to the truths of spiritual life.

The church in this poem is again the Roman Catholic church, represented this time by the Convent of Notre Dame de la Charité des Orphelines de Marie de la Délivrande, familiarly known as either la Vierge-Fidèle (the Faithful Virgin) or la Délivrande. This convent was, and still is, primarily an orphanage, remotely connected with the Missionary Fathers of la Délivrande. (For an account of the founding of the orphanage, see pp. 68-69.) Mellerio had been involved to
some degree with the Missionary Fathers, but he had left the legacy to the convent; and the religious organizational structure was loose enough that the Missionary Fathers were not involved in the suit. The name "la Délivrande" must have been a difficult problem for Browning when he decided to change all the original names to avoid a libel suit. "La Délivrande" is popularly supposed to be associated with la délivrance ("rescue"), whereas actually, according to a little pamphlet recently published by the convent, it is a distortion of la Delle Yvrande, an ancient name for the region derived etymologically from the Saxon delle ("valley," English "dale") and the Celtic ewi-randa ("water"-"frontier"): "the valley where water marks the frontier." In Roman times the Delle Yvrande was the valley of the small Douvette River, which served as the boundary between the two Gallic tribes of the Baiocasses and the Viducasses. But over the centuries popular superstition had transformed this meaning to "the Deliveress," and Browning had found this confusion very useful to demonstrate Mellerio's gullibility:

This Ravissante, now: when he saw the church
For the first time, and to his dying-day,
His firm belief was that the name fell fit
From the Delivering Virgin, niched and known;
As if there wanted records to attest
The appellation was a pleasantry,
A pious rendering of Rare Vissante,
The proper name which erst our province bore.

(2.152-59)

When Browning changed "la Délivrande" to "la Ravissante," he gained a nice suggestion of a rather violent power of fascination, but he lost all etymological connection with "Delivering Virgin."

The darker connotation of Browning's choice of name for the convent is only a small part of his systematic denigration of its role in Mellerio's drama. In Mellerio himself, Browning subordinated all else to show a dim but well-intentioned man trapped in a painful dilemma. It is useful, almost necessary, for Browning that neither horn of this particular dilemma be really worth the suffering Mellerio undergoes in
his inability to choose between them, because the point of the situation as Browning shows it is that the reality of Mellerio's suffering and the courage of his solution do not depend in any way on the inherent value of the alternatives between which his choice must be made. Mellerio is waver­ing not between an ideal romantic love and an ideal religious faith but between Mme Debacker and the Convent of la Délivrande. So, for the same reasons that Browning presented Mme Debacker in the poem as a specimen "inferiorly proposed" (4.762), a grade of "pettier love" (4.867), regardless of her actual role in the real event, he also lost no opportunity in the poem to show the convent as grasping, ruthless, and conniving, in spite of the fact that there was such an utter lack of evidence to support the plaintiffs' charges concerning the convent that they were shamed into dropping all of them right in the middle of the suit.

The dominant trait in Browning's portrait of the convent is greed. First summoned to Tailleville by a tortured Mellerio "for the cure of soul-disease" (3.865), the "noneexcluding, all-collecting Church" (1.965) is depicted as being content to depart with "palm well crossed with coin" (3.952) rather than insisting on the fact of sin and refusing to let Mellerio think he could bribe his way to forgiveness. There is a parallel here between Browning's disapproval of the convent's self-serving leniency and his disapproval of Mme Debacker's protection of Mellerio, as she consistently chose to "smoothen truth away" (4.863) rather than force him to the painful choice. Still, Browning sees extenuating circumstances in Mme Debacker's case that he cannot find in the convent's, and his censure becomes scatological as he contemplates the

Father Priest
And Mother Nun, who came and went and came,
Beset this [Tailleville], trundled money-muck
To midden and the main heap oft enough. . . .

(4.878-81)

Calling la Délivrande a dunghill is indeed graphic scorn for such greedy "posting" (3.864) to Tailleville for gifts time and time again, but Browning's heady indignation ignores the
simple fact that the charge is clearly and utterly false. As their
counsel pointed out, its inhabitants were cloistered, so none
of them could ever have come to the château at any time, for
any purpose (p. 79). There was not even any correspondence
between the convent and Mellerio, except for "one circular
for lottery tickets and, five months after the testament, two
banal letters concerning [assistance in obtaining a domestic
servant,] a service which M. Mellerio also requested from his
cousin Mme Agnel and which events did not permit to be
rendered" (p. 79). However delighted the convent may actu­
ally have been to receive benefactions, there was really no
evidence whatever that it actively sought them, let alone that
such scheming was its only motive for its dealings with
Mellerio.

But in Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, the image of the
convent is entirely one of a self-serving materialism, whose
only interest lies in exploiting the credulity of the faithful for
its own worldly advantage. Browning calls such corrupt re­
ligion a "superstition," "extinct . . . with my good will"
(4.887-88); but to understand his position, it is necessary to
recall that his own religious convictions were very strong,
and that he is contemptuous of the kind of practices he por­
trays in his poem exactly because he sees them as so rank a
travesty of the true spiritual teaching Mellerio so badly
needed. Browning judges Mellerio's faith in such miracle­
mongering to have been admirably deep and sincere, but sad­
ly misdirected—"sickly," "foolish and fantastic" (3.851,937).
It is another instance of separating a judgment of the quality
of a man's commitment from a judgment of the merit of the
object his commitment seizes on. As Mellerio had failed to
perceive the inferior nature of his relations with Mme
Debacker,

So with his other instance of mistake;
Was Christianity the [Delivrande]?

(2.470-71)

Browning is finally so disgusted by the grossness of this su­
perstition from which, in his opinion, all spiritual life has
been drained, that, in what is perhaps the most grotesque
passage of the entire poem, he dismisses it as nothing but the
corpse of real Christianity, and imagines drawing a heavy night-cap

O'er such a decomposing face of things,
Once so alive, it seemed immortal too!

(4.892-93)

With both Mellerio's mistress and his religion, then, Browning has gone to some pains to ensure that they are both perceived as unworthy of his devotion, so that a sharp contrast is created between the moral and the intellectual dimensions of Mellerio's quandary, and hence between the positive extreme of Mellerio's moral courage and the negative extreme of his intellectual obtuseness. "The heart was wise according to its lights / And limits" (4.757-58); but if Mellerio had only "exerted brain" (4.745), he would have discerned the inadequacy of Mme Debacker's overprotective love. He would also have built up

some better theory
Of how God operates in heaven and earth,
Than would establish Him participant
In doings yonder at the [Délivrande].

(4.753-56)

It was this interest in showing the two claimants to Mellerio's affection at their worst that seems to me the most probable source for Browning's most blatant departure of all from the objective fact he claims to be retailing so faithfully—his entire omission of the major portion of the lawsuit, the portion dealing with the charges of undue influence against Mme Debacker and the convent. In the poem the only legal issue is "to dispute / [Antonio Mellerio's] competence, / Being insane, to make a valid will" (4.896-98). No mention is even made of the other half of the charges, or of the fact that the convent was also a party to the suit. Clearly, Browning's dark insinuations concerning Mme Debacker and the convent would not have been well served by an obligation to admit that all charges against both were found to be totally without foundation, and that they both were totally exonerated.

The convent's innocence, in particular, as has been mentioned, was brilliantly vindicated by their demonstration of
such an entire lack of evidence that the heirs were forced to make a public retraction of the charges in the middle of the suit (see pp. 88-89, 91). Simply ignoring this dimension of the case had several advantages for Browning: it avoided an inconveniently positive impression of the convent and the mistress, it helped keep the focus of the poem's attention directed on the mental condition of Mellerio himself, and it obviated the need for a full explanation of the complicated issues involved in the court's handling of the case.

This last point is significant. In the poem Browning summarizes the court's judgment in forty-four quoted lines, mentioning that the family had, after all, found Mellerio to be quite sane enough to do business with, then declaring his religious eccentricities to have been "'Neither excessive nor inordinate'" (4.947), and finally deciding that his death was an "'accident / Which ended fatally. The case is closed'" (4.954-55). Not only does this manner of presentation perpetuate the illusion that the question of suicide was as central an issue in fact as it was made to be in the poem, but the tone of brisk self-confidence in this passage is an important contribution to the impression Browning created for the court in his poem. That impression is one of a straightforward, rather plodding institutionalized competency, one that dealt fairly with the most obvious facts of the case but that was not capable of probing beneath the surface to the deeper truths available only to intuition. In much the same way that Browning showed in *The Ring and the Book* the Roman court finding Guido Franceschini guilty without ever understanding the real motives involved, so here he shows the French court reaching the correct verdict regarding Mellerio's sanity without even glimpsing the underlying reality—as Browning sees it—of his behavior. Although the judges do not even dimly perceive what Browning takes to be the real meaning of Mellerio's death, their judgment, "issued with all regularity, [was] just, inevitable, / Nowise to be contested by what few / Can judge the judges" (4.908-11). But in spite of the poem's impression of a merely superficial accuracy in the court's performance, the legal documents, especially the disinterested summary of the public prosecutor and the text of the court's judgment, do in fact display a remarkably subtle sensitivity to each issue of this
complicated case. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated, to shore up his own imaginative interpretation of Mellerio's death, Browning altered or omitted so many corroborative facts that the cumulative effect of reading the trial transcripts is remarkably different from that of reading the poem.

On the whole, I think it is probably fair to say that it would really not have been possible for Browning to make a convincing case for his conclusions by attempting to derive them from the facts exactly as they appeared in the actual event. Such an extreme statement concerning the discrepancy between the poem and its sources could not be made about *The Ring and the Book*, where no single departure from the original sources is critical to the poem's general meaning; nor do those departures, even if taken all together, comprise as radical a transformation of that material as occurs in *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*. The real problem for Browning in this later poem, baldly stated, was that his two most important themes entailed mutually contradictory treatments of his source material. On the one hand, to stress the possibility of using the imagination to perceive truths veiled beneath the vulgar facts "reported in the newspaper" (4.31) required him to demonstrate a carefully maintained fidelity to literal detail; but, on the other, to find in those facts a pattern of evolving moral education leading inevitably to moral action required a degree of adjustment of those facts that was inconsistent with literal fidelity. The facts simply did not fit both themes, and what was sacrificed to fit both themes into the poem was a kind of integrity in its claim to literal historical truth. This sacrifice is not apparent within the work itself; indeed, there it is carefully obscured. But when the poem is examined in relation to its sources, *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* gives the impression that here Browning sought to exploit all the thematic advantages of the kind of factual basis he had so successfully used in *The Ring and the Book*, without being willing to forgo interpretations that were not really supported by that factual basis.

There are interesting comparisons to be made, on this subject of the relationship between a work and its sources, between *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* and the other poems
of similar scale that followed it in the last sixteen years of Browning's career. Out of the last twelve volumes he published, only four are comparably large: *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), *The Inn Album* (1875), *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus* (1877), and *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887). In none of these did Browning engage in quite the same sort of effort to display the profound psychology hidden under historical evidence as he had in *The Ring and the Book* and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, although all four of the later poems were based, to one degree or another, on objective fact that easily could have lent itself to such treatment.

*Aristophanes' Apology* consists of an elaborately convoluted dramatic monologue framing a translation of Euripides' *Herakles*. Browning scrupulously kept this frame separate from the drama for which it provides such a startling foil, a treatment that is in marked contrast to his earlier handling of Euripides' *Alkestis in Balaustion's Adventure* (1871). There the narrator's recital of the play—part direct translation, part summary—has a quasi-Christian interpretation that is thoroughly interwoven with her own dramatic situation and is only tenuously related to the original play that the poem purports to reproduce. The method of *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, in fact, closely resembles that of *Balaustion's Adventure*, since both poems depend heavily on giving the impression that what is in fact a very loose "translation" is faithfully close to the original. Two years after *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, however, in *Aristophanes' Apology*, his second dramatic recital, Browning entirely avoided the disingenuousness which that earlier method required. It is an interesting speculation that perhaps his experience with *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* contributed to his change of approach. As for *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, published two years after *Aristophanes' Apology*, that is nothing more than a painfully literal translation, "literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language," as Browning boasted in his "Preface."6 In that work he made no gesture at all toward interpreting the raw material of the original play.

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Although *The Inn Album*, like *Red Cotton Night-Cap*
Country, was based on historical events, "an actual occurrence in the life of Lord de Ros (1792-1839)," the poem stands at such a far remove from those events that it derives no particular thematic impact from that circumstance. It has no significant connection with its source, and makes no claim whatever to specific historical factuality. It might as well be completely fictional. In Browning's last major poem, Parley ings, which traces the influence of seven moral and aesthetic figures on his own early development, he did return to a mode whose appreciation obviously requires a recognition of its intimate relation to extrinsic material, but in this case the poem is so frankly subjective that its real connection is not so much to the works of those seven men as to Browning's own idiosyncratic interpretations of them. The accuracy of those interpretations is not really a central issue. Consequently, for instance, William DeVane's discovery that Browning had radically misrepresented Bernard de Mandeville, the subject of the first parleying, is really more of an interesting curiosity than a revaluation of Browning's method, since the themes of the parleyings do not fundamentally depend on whether or not the portraits they present are good likenesses. So, in spite of the fact that Browning's later poetry, even more than his earlier, came to stress the practical consequences of moral decisions, Red Cotton Night-Cap Country was the last long poem in which he sought to demonstrate that principle at work in the public records of an actual life. Comparison of the poem with those public records raises the question as to whether his abandonment of this technique may have been related to an increasing impatience with the recalcitrance of "pure crude fact" as a sufficiently transparent manifestation of the themes he asked it to display. For all his reputation of being oblivious to aesthetic subtleties—a reputation that he acknowledged in the Young Man's jibe in The Inn Album, "That bard's a Browning; he neglects the form: / But ah, the sense, ye gods, the weighty sense!" (1.17-18)—a study of the sources of Red Cotton Night-Cap Country suggests the poet's dissatisfaction with the failure of a complex set of objective facts to shape themselves into as clear and elegant an illustration of a desired set of themes as he could have wished. At any rate, never again did Browning embark on such a project.