

THE INCARNATION OF POMPILIA

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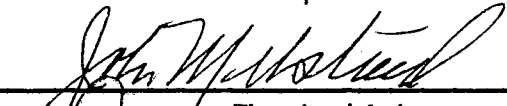
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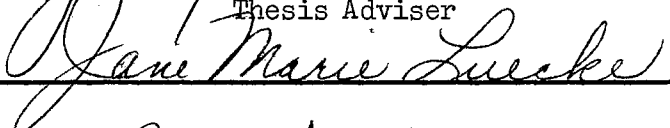
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PREFACE

I first encountered the theme of the Incarnation in the poetry of Robert Browning in a seminar on the Victorian poets. While doing a paper on the imagery associated with Pompilia in The Ring and the Book, I found that many of the images employed are traditionally associated with Christ, the Virgin Mother, and God. On closer examination of the Pope's monologue, it seemed that he glorified Pompilia as the embodiment of the Incarnation. For Browning, the Incarnation was the ultimate union of the two processes of life: God's self-revelation to man; and man's growth toward the divine. My purpose is to demonstrate how the Pope, speaking for Browning, characterizes Pompilia as the essence of this union.

I wish to thank Dr. John Milstead not only for his valuable suggestions and criticism in directing this study, but also for his assistance and encouragement throughout my graduate study at Oklahoma State University. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Jane Marie Luecke for her assistance in this study and for her many discussions of the relationship between literature and religion. Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to my wife, Jody, for her assistance, patience, and encouragement in the preparation of this study.

THE INCARNATION OF POMPILIA

H. B. Charlton, in his essay "Browning As Poet of Religion," describes Robert Browning's religion as "basically simple,"

He believed in God, first realized as a
God of Power, and then revealed as a God
of Love; he believed in Christ as literally
the son of God, and ... in the Incarnation
as the one essential 'miracle'.¹

Although Charlton is correct in stating that the Incarnation is the "one essential 'miracle,'" Browning's religion and his use of the Incarnation in his works seems anything but "simple." His poetry presents us with the history of a man's search for religious faith and assurance in the face of 19th century religious speculation and religious skepticism. Browning refused to compromise with any of the religious movements, such as negativism or perspectivism, that promoted, in one way or another, acquiescence as the solution to man's isolation from God. Rather he sought to establish a positive, growing communion between God and man. The Incarnation became the base for this communion. W. Hall Griffin, in his biography, refers to Browning as "an ardent and consistent theist" and a Christian by intuition rather than dogma, a view shared in varying degrees by most critics.²

The miracle of the Incarnation appears throughout Browning's works as the base upon which he builds his statement of faith. However, the critical discussion of the Incarnation appears to be somewhat incomplete in regard to The Ring and the Book, according to DeVane "the apex of

Browning's career as a poet, and the epitome of all his thought."³

This problem involves the Pope and how he, as Browning's spokesman, deals with the Incarnation in his monologue. While much of the earliest criticism of The Ring and the Book identified the Pope as Browning's spokesman but did not deal with the Incarnation, more recent studies dealing specifically with the Incarnation appear either to omit or underestimate the importance of the Pope as Browning's voice. The Pope not only summarizes the poet's philosophy of life and reinforces Browning's judgments of the characters, but most importantly, in his judgment and characterization of Pompilia he unites Browning's two central religious tenets — the Incarnation and theism — in one symbol, the creative female in whom God's infinite creative power and love is incarnate.

The major concern of much of the early criticism of The Ring and the Book, for example that of Hodell, Orr, Gest, and Cook, was the gold-ring metaphor and the question of how successful Browning was in relating the facts of the Old Yellow Book.⁴ Although these critics do not treat the Incarnation in the poem, they do provide valuable background information concerning the history of the poem and its source. They also believe that the Pope, in Hodell's words, "is the mouthpiece of Browning's own comment on the tragedy."⁵ Robert Langbaum, in "The Ring and the Book: A Relativist Poem," also interprets the Pope as Browning's spokesman, who "portrays in Pompilia the most exalted saintliness."⁶ He contends that Pompilia and Guido serve as moral poles by which the other characters are to be judged. He explores Browning's relativistic view of good and evil and man's inability to reach complete truth, but he does not deal with the Incarnation as an essential aspect

of Browning's religious thought. Willard C. Smith, in his Browning's Star Imagery, centers his discussion on Caponsacchi as the "star" leading Pompilia out of the darkness of Guido's satanic hold. Smith thoroughly traces the star images in the work and concludes that the star represents, first, Caponsacchi as Pompilia's light of salvation; and ultimately, in the Pope's monologue the star transcends "association with a single character to become a thoroughly integrated element in grand image [sic] of light that represents universal truth, the light of heaven."⁷ However, Smith fails to draw a clear distinction between the star-light and the sun-light, especially in the Pope's monologue. The Pope, as the spokesman for divine truth, derives his power from the sun, the symbol for God's power and truth,

Yet my poor spark had for its source, the sun;
Thither I sent the great looks which compel
Light from its fount: all that I do and am
Comes from the truth.⁸

Several critics who deal with the Incarnation in The Ring and the Book also emphasize the Pope as Browning's spokesman. However, their view of the Pope is somewhat limited. Charlton, for example, sees the Pope as merely relating the tale of the Incarnation in an "argumentative statement" and does not relate the Pope's characterization of Pompilia to the Incarnation.⁹ This view is shared by William O. Raymond in "The Pope in The Ring and the Book."¹⁰ The Pope "summarizes" Browning's philosophy of life, especially the intuitive revelation of Christ's Incarnation, but does so in a didactic manner. However, Raymond adds,

The Incarnation represents an intercommunion between the divine and the human; and Browning felt that there was something that corresponded with this in his own personality and experience in life.¹¹

But Raymond does not explain what this "corresponding something" was.

Kingsbury Badger seems to suggest that it is related to Pompilia, "Browning's most glorious creation of a character in whom Love is incarnate."¹² Badger's study is very helpful in tracing the manifestations of God's Love in human experience, but specific parallels between Pompilia and the Incarnation are limited. He makes a general statement concerning the Incarnation but makes no distinction between such characters as David of Saul, Pompilia, and Caponsacchi. Badger states "that God incarnate in David was a prophecy of God incarnate in Jesus and that both were prophesies of God incarnate in all, or any, men."¹³

Pompilia and Caponsacchi are also treated as indistinguishable by Hoxie N. Fairchild in Religious Trends in English Poetry.¹⁴ Fairchild observes that, in their respective monologues,

Caponsacchi and Pompilia do not quite deify each other, but they explicitly canonize each other as embodiments of that perfect love which is indistinguishable from divine love.... Such love as theirs, then, is all that is necessary for salvation. It is the equivalent of 'the fact, or fancy, of Christ's cross and passion.'¹⁵

Fairchild's observations are most helpful in associating Pompilia with the Incarnation, but it seems that he unduly limits his discussion by centering it totally on the monologues of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. He omits the Pope's "ultimate judgment" to which all of the other monologues are leading. The Pope does distinguish between the two characters and, it seems, resolves the problem raised in Fairchild's own conclusion: that the love between Caponsacchi and Pompilia is beautiful and good but "betokens some confusion as to the difference between man and God."¹⁶

William Whitla, in the Preface to his notable study of the Incarnation in Browning's poetry, The Central Truth, describes The Ring

and the Book as "the culmination of Browning's genius.... Here the three themes of religion, art, and love reach their fruition."¹⁷ He bases his discussion on the gold-ring metaphor as the symbol for the Incarnation and examines the structural parallels between the poem and the ring metaphor. Each character relates to the Incarnation in the degree that he perceives or experiences truth and love. Pompilia and Caponsacchi experience similar levels of truth and love, but Whitla distinguishes between the two. Pompilia becomes "a pale reflection of the light of God" and leads Caponsacchi out of the darkness.¹⁸ Caponsacchi, Pompilia's own "guiding star," is still too tied to mortal love and his experience is dimmed by his personal anguish over her death. Whitla points out associations of Pompilia and the Incarnation but does not view her as a living symbol of it. He does not discuss the imagery employed by the Pope, but rather interprets the Pope's monologue as a philosophical and theological justification for the events and the opinions which the characters hold.¹⁹

Richard D. Altick and James F. Loucks III deal with the Incarnation in The Ring and the Book from a slightly different viewpoint than Whitla, in Browning's Roman Murder Story.²⁰ However, they also seem to reduce the importance of the Pope and his monologue. Altick and Loucks focus their attention on the similarities between the characters and events of Browning's poem and the story of Christ's life in the New Testament. They feel that Browning "clearly intended that the Fraceschini case be read as a latter-day story of Christian judgment and redemption."²¹ Pompilia acts the parts of Christ and Mary, and Caponsacchi assumes the roles of Joseph and the star of Bethlehem. The majority of images discussed in reference to the

Incarnation appear in Pompilia's and Caponsacchi's monologues. Pompilia makes several references to the parallels between the recent birth of her son Gaetano and Christ's nativity, and compares her flight to Rome to that of Joseph and Mary to Egypt. Caponsacchi views her death as a type of crucifixion. The Pope, although recognized as Browning's voice, seems to be relegated to a position of a "Pontius Pilate" type who overcomes popular pressure to resolve the "doubt" about Pompilia's innocence. In viewing the Pope in this manner, Altick and Loucks reduce the importance of the Pope's monologue considerably.

Despite the many references Caponsacchi and Pompilia make to the Nativity and the historical parallels between Pompilia and Christ, it is the Pope who characterizes her as a living symbol for the Incarnation. Speaking in "God's name" (X, 163) he praises Pompilia as the defender and prime agent of "the trust of trusts/ Life from the Ever Living" (X, 1080-81). She, as the creative female force, embodies the essence of both the Incarnation — God's union with man in Christ — and the incarnation of his divine creativity, love, and life in Nature. Browning looked to human experience for new living symbols that embodied the supernatural reality that they signified in the same way that the Incarnation of Christ and God's immanence in Nature had in one past.

The Incarnation — the meeting of God's self-revelation to man and man's growth toward the divine — is not static, not limited to the historical Christ, but continues to manifest itself in experiences of creativity and love "in man's due degree," experiences of which Pompilia, as the creative female, is a living symbol. Nature is also a dynamic manifestation of the divine attributes of creativity and life

in the finite form. Thus in the Pope's monologue, Browning gives new life to the traditional Christian symbols and images associated with God, the Incarnate Christ, and the Virgin Mother, and revives the Incarnation as a living experience possible for all men.

As the head of the Church, the symbolic living extension of Christ's Incarnation, the Pope speaks on a number of related problems that were of vital concern to Browning. One of these is the real and ideal state of the institutionalized Church. He sees that "Christ's living Body" has lost much of the spirit of the Incarnation and is now made up of barren branches grafted to the tree. The Archbishop and the Conventite nuns are examples of those Christians who become so caught up in the order and bureaucracy of the institution that they totally forget the real meaning and purpose of their positions. He likens the Archbishop to the "hireling that did turn and flee" (X, 992) when faced with the opportunity for real Christian action. The nuns, "meant to help women because these helped Christ" (X, 1500), turn on Pompilia, "unsay/ all the fine speeches, — who was saint is whore" (X, 1523-24), in order to gain any inheritance that might be left after her death. The Pope views them as worse than the soldiers who "only threw dice for Christ's coat" (X, 1526). Their betrayal of Pompilia is as despicable as if the Apostles had disputed if "it was Christ's coat at all" (X, 1528). Yet these are not the worst within the Church. Guido and his brothers, Paul and Girolamo, the "irreligiousest/ of all mankind, religion's parasite[s]" (X, 453-54), take on the cloak of the Church solely in order to further their own base intentions.

The Pope sees Guido as

... furnished forth for his career,
 On starting for the life chance in our world
 With nearly all we count sufficient help:
 Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,
 A solid intellect: the wit to seek,
 Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal
 To deal in whatsoever circumstances
 Should minister to man, make life succeed.
 (X, 400-07)

And as further aid, Guido has taken orders in the Church. Yet he does not succeed in life, but becomes the "midmost blotch of black" (X, 869). He, like his brothers, abuses institutions and the power that he gained from his positions in society and the Church. Guido's motives, both in taking his vows and in proposing marriage to Pompilia, were "fartherest... from ends alleged... the best, he knew and feigned, the worse, he took" (X, 534, 37). The Pope also recognizes that these barren branches of the Church are not limited to this particular case. Many of the men who make up the Church have given in completely to secularism or are so caught up in minute details of "dogma" that they ignore their real purpose. As an example of the absurdity to which this can grow, the Pope alludes to the conflict between the Dominican and Jesuit missionaries concerning the proper name for God in Chinese (X, 1589-1613). This type of Church, that totally depersonalizes religion and is only concerned with form and laws is as odious to the Pope as it is to Browning.

In judging Guido, the Pope also deals with another problem that was important to Browning as well as part of his association of Pompilia and the Incarnation. Because Guido bases his defense on both "natural law" and man's law, the Pope faces the problem of the female's rights and worth within society. Guido and his supporters protest that

'Take/ Guido's life, sapped society shall crack
 'Whereof the main prop was, is, and shall be

'— Supremacy of husband over wife!'
(X, 2032-35)

This view of woman as totally submissive to her lord and master, and the implications that women are the cause of evil, was one of the dominant concepts of the female's role in society in Browning's time as well as the Pope's. However, both reject this idea completely. Browning tended to idealize women as better than men, and depended quite heavily on Elizabeth Barrett Browning in his own life.²² The Pope faces this argument as he reviews the lawyer's final pleas; not only will the whole society crumble if he judges against the man, but the Church will also fall to the heretics. Innocent is not taken in by these threats and dismisses the argument with no comment but, "I will [judge] Sirs: but a voice other than yours quickens my spirit" (X, 2099-2100). The voice is God's speaking through Pompilia.

The Pope's full judgment of Guido serves as the antithesis by which we are to see Pompilia. Although the Pope characterizes Guido as the "midmost blotch of black" (X, 869) and Pompilia as "perfect in whiteness" (X, 1006), good and evil were not absolutes in Browning's thinking. Guido was not inherently evil but degenerated to the level of a monster because he failed to grow. Growth, in Browning's view, is man's prime responsibility and purpose in life. Life, for Browning as well as for the Pope, is a process that man experiences in stages. All of the absolute virtues — Love, Creativity, Truth, Life — are aspects of the divine and must remain relative for man. The Pope here reflects Browning's words of Book I when he says;

O Thou...
Exist out somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense, —
There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)
In the absolute immensity, the whole

Appreciable solely by Thyself, —
 Here, by the little mind of man, reduced
 To littleness that suits his faculty,
 In the degree appreciable too; (X, 1307-23)

Man was "formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain/ the good beyond him, — which attempt is growth, — repeats God's process in man's due degree" (I, 715-17). Man grows by sharing in the process of God's self-revelation.

Man's means of repeating "God's process" (I, 717) is love, creative love as shown by God in the Incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation was, at once, the ultimate meeting of the Godhead and the human, and the pivotal step in man's development toward the Supreme Good and Supreme Love. That this act was a step in a growth process implies continuity. Man was not instantly elevated to the divine level but was afforded the opportunity to share in an increasing part of God's "whole" creativity and love. The old laws of the God of Power were replaced by the new laws of the God of Love announced by Christ. The essence of the Incarnation continues to manifest itself in human experience, regardless of time, through acts of creativity and love in man, that is, through growth toward the divine. Man therefore must be judged by the end or goodness towards which he is growing and not by the initial or any intermediate step. As long as growth continues, man increasingly shares in the love and truth of the Incarnation. Evil exists, but not in any innate form. Evil is the result of a lack of growth or a regression to a state lower than that which has been achieved.

The Pope, therefore, condemns Guido not only for the grotesque murder of Pompilia and her parents, but also for his lifelong failure to grow, the ultimate cause of the act itself. He reviews Guido's

life completely, his potential, his actions, and his motives, before passing judgment. He finds every action rooted in hate and greed for power, rather than love. Guido appears to be subject only to the laws of fear and revenge. He tries to manipulate his positions within the Church and society for his own ends, resorts to deceit in seeking revenge, and he abuses people while hiding behind the "letter of the law." He refuses love, and thus cuts himself off from any chance for growth. He gradually degenerates from merely a poor noble and a relatively harmless social parasite to a monstrously destructive beast who "wallow[s] and sleep[s] in the first wayside straw/ ...[a] swine, the devil inside him" (X, 847, 51). Pompilia, on the other hand, shares in the life of love and grows from a "chance-sown cleft-nursed seed" (X, 1041) into a rose fit for "the breast of God" (X, 1047).

In characterizing Pompilia, the Pope employs many images traditionally associated with Christ and the Virgin Mother. These images also directly contrast with those employed in reference to Guido. The Pope begins by characterizing her as "the lamb-like child" (X, 559) who is at the mercy of the wolf-Guido. The lamb, of course, is a traditional Christian symbol for both Christ and his followers. The wolf is also a traditional symbol for evil. However, Guido's wolfishness might also be seen as part of the rather grotesque animal imagery associated with Guido throughout the Pope's monologue. Guido is likened to "the ambiguous fish [who] detaches flesh from shell" (X, 486-7), a "slug" (X, 497), a "sand-fly and slush worm at their garbage feast" (X, 499), a "toad" (X, 550), a "gor-crow" (X, 580), and a "swine" (X, 851). In fact, Guido's whole family is described in

terms of a brute animal pack. His mother is a

...gaunt grey nightmare...
 The hag that gave these three abortions birth
 Unmotherly mother and unwomanly
 Woman, that turns motherhood to shame,
 Womanliness to loathing: no one word,
 No gesture to curb cruelty a whit
 More than the she-pard thwarts her playsome whelps
 Trying their milk teeth on the soft o' the throat
 O' the first fawn, flung, with those beseeching eyes,
 Flat on the covert. (X, 911-20)

All of this animal imagery reflects the state to which Guido and his family have degenerated because they refused to love. The "unmotherly mother and unwomanly/ woman" (X, 913-14) who bears "three abortions" (X, 912) is in complete contrast to Pompilia who, like Mary, became the "Mother elect" (X, 1076).

Pompilia's perfect whiteness, her soul "that will not take pollution, ermine-like/ armed from dishonor by its own soft snow" (X, 679-80) is also contrasted with the color images employed by the Pope in describing Guido and his family. Guido, the blackest black, "stands honest in the red of the flame/ beside [Paul's] yellow that would pass for white" (X, 882-3). The youngest brother, Girolamo, reflects "hell's own blue tine" (X, 907), and the mother is "gaunt grey" (X, 911). The Pope here echoes Browning's own descriptions of Guido and his "satyr-family" (I, 570) — the "fox-faced Paul" (I, 549), and the "grey mother with a monkey-mien" (I, 571). Pompilia's whiteness, a traditional symbol for innocence and purity, also strengthens the Pope's analogy between Pompilia and the Virgin Mother. Both Pompilia and the Pope make numerous allusions to the Virgin Mary and the birth of Christ when discussing the birth of Pompilia's son, Gaetano. Pompilia declares that "my babe was, is/ will be mine only" (VII, 896-7). She also points out the many parallels between the two births,

such as the flight, the nearness of Christmas, and so on. The Pope goes beyond the surface similarities and compares her to Mary treading on the head of the serpent,

... plant firm foot
On neck of man, tread man into the hell
Meet for him, and obey God all the more!
(X, 1061-63)

The Pope employs other traditional motifs throughout his monologue; Pompilia is always associated with light, while Guido is linked to darkness; Pompilia is warm, young, and alive, while Guido is cold, decaying, and sterile. Pompilia blossoms in the warmth and freshness of Rome and is linked to the sunlight. Guido, from the time he married Pompilia on the "dark eve of December's dearest day" (VII, 426) in the empty, cold church, is associated with death and darkness. His home, Arezzo, is a cold, dark, stone castle that has fallen into decay and ruin.

Pompilia, the rose that "spreads itself, one wide glory of desire/ to incorporate the whole great sun it loves" (X, 1044-45), is nearly choked off from life by her stay with Guido. She confesses in her monologue that, in order to endure the torture of Guido and his younger brother, she retreated into total passivity and longed only "to sleep, and so get nearer death!" (VII, 1221). She remained so until "a broad yellow sunbeam was let fall/ from heaven to earth" (VII, 1225-26) and she realized that she was pregnant. The Pope also recognizes that this "new life" brought about the great change in her life and prompted her to abandon Guido and flee to Rome. He regards it as the spark for the transformation of Pompilia from an innocent child to the agent of divine creativity and love.

The Pope uses numerous other traditional Christian images to

"prove" Pompilia's innocence. And we see her as a young girl endowed with the virtues of innocence, patience, and kindness. However, because she is not static, not complete, she grows to be much more than a "child-bride" who perseveres despite the torture of a wolfish old man.

The Pope sees in her characteristics of the divine. She becomes the finite manifestation of the infinite powers of God: Strength, Love, and Creativity (X, 1363-82). Her association with Christ and the Virgin Mother transcends the many surface parallels as she embodies the essence of the Incarnation and the Virgin Mother. She takes on the powers of strength, love, and creativity that Christ and Mary manifested. She becomes a living, active agent of divine attributes in a world of dying faith and love.

She, like Christ and Browning's gold ring metaphor in Book I, grows to the "perfect round" through fusion with the base, and in the process raises the base to a higher level. Christ's Incarnation, the fusion of the divine with the human, through man, brought to mankind a new strength, a new love, and a new growth. His divinity was not tarnished by this fusion with the alloy. The fusion makes possible a greater creation. The gold ring is far greater than the mere potential in the crude elements. So also Christ and Pompilia form a greater creation, raise man, through their fusion with the base. Her powers of love and creativity grow to divine levels, and her influence on other men, such as the Pope, Capponasacchi, and eventually even Guido, correspond to Christ's effects on mankind. Guido, despite his base, evil nature, becomes an agent of the divine will. His "sin conceived/ to the full [is] crowned with triumph" (X, 7978-99) by Pompilia's

growth to the divine. She becomes the living symbol for God's creativity on earth;

Thou at first prompting of what I call God,
 And fools call Nature, didst hear, comprehend,
 Accept the obligation laid on thee,
 Mother elect, to save the unborn child,
 As brute and bird do, reptile and fly,
 Ay and, I nothing doubt, even tree, shrub, plant
 And flower o' the field, all in a common pact
 To worthily defend the trust of trusts,
 Life from the Ever Living. (X, 1073-81)

Pompilia's defense of "Life from the Ever Living" represents more than mere animal instinct to protect the young. Although the Pope sees her as "all in a common pact" (X, 1079) with the creative forces in Nature, he sees in her more than a representative of a theistic Earth Mother. She acts in direct response to the "prompting" (X, 1073), a revelation from God. As the female of the human race, she can share through her creativity in a greater share of God's infinite process than the "lower" stages of Nature. Thus she not only raises the level of growth in man but in all nature in proportionate degree.

Concurrent with her sharing in God's creativity is her growth in divine strength. Just as Christ was born to save mankind, Pompilia takes on powers of salvation, rescuing her own "savior" Caponsacchi. Here the Pope associates Pompilia with his own image of God, the sun. Caponsacchi, in rescuing her from Guido, acted in

All blindness, bravery, and obedience! — blind?
 Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,
 Delirious with the plenitude of light. (X, 1561-63)

Pompilia is the blinding sun that leads Caponsacchi out of darkness and into the realm of love. Caponsacchi's monologue reflects the tremendous effect Pompilia had on his life. She gave him strength, love, and the power to find his own identity. He played the role of

"fribble and coxcomb, yet, as priest" (VI, 340) assigned to him by his Church superiors, until he first saw Pompilia. Her innocence and beauty "burnt to [his] brain, as sunbeam thro' shut eyes" (VI, 435) and he "turned Christian" (VI, 474). The Pope praises Pompilia for taking on his responsibilities as Vicar of Christ in her defense of Caponsacchi from Guido;

Thou... didst resist --
 Anticipate the office that is mine --
 And with his own sword stay the upraised arm,
 The endeavor of the wicked, and defend
 Him who, -- again in my default, -- was there
 For visible providence.
 (X, 1081-86)

Her saving power also has an effect on the basest of all men, Guido. In his second monologue, Guido un masks himself and says "Let me turn wolf, be whole... grow out of man/ glut the wolf-nature" (XI, 2056, 59-60 Italics mine). Guido here reiterates his refusal to grow. His desire to "be whole" (XI, 2056) contrasts completely with Pompilia's limitless love. However, in the same speech, Guido admits that "there was no touch in her of hate... to know I suffered, would still sadden her" (XI, 2089, 91). And in his last words he recognizes her as his only hope for salvation. He admits the divine power of her love as he pleases; "Abate: -- Cardinal, -- Christ, -- Maria, -- God/ Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" (XI, 2426-27).

The Pope who employs numerous trinity images throughout his monologue, turns to a comparison between three isosceles triangles to find the source or base of Pompilia's creativity and saving strength. First,

... look at man!
 Is he the strong, intelligent and good
 Up to his own conceivable height? Nowise.
 (X, 1356-58)

And God?

Conjecture of the worker, by the work:
 Is there strength there? - enough: intelligence?
 Ample: but goodness in a like degree?
 Not to the human eye in the present state,
 An isosceles deficient in the base.
 What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
 But just the instance which this tale supplies
 Of love without a limit? (X, 1362-69)

God's creation, and therefore God, appears to man's limited mind incomplete, in that infinite goodness or love, the base of the trinity of God, is not manifest in the world. However, Pompilia, who does manifest "love without a limit" (X, 1369) supplies "what lacks" (X, 1366) and "God shows complete" (X, 1372).

Pompilia revives the living trinity of powers that Christ set forth in his Incarnation. She is loving, "creative and self-sacrificing too/ and thus eventually God-like" (X, 1382-83). She completes another stage in God's process of self-revelation by her love: God began to reveal Himself, His infinite Power, Intelligence, and Creativity in the creation of the world; He revealed more of His infinite Love and saving strength in Christ's Incarnation and self-sacrifice; and in Pompilia's creativity and self-sacrifice based on divine Love, "God shows complete" (X, 1372).

This trinity of God-Christ-Pompilia does not imply that Pompilia is a God, that she is complete, but rather that she is growing in divine powers and "thus eventually God-like" (X, 1383 Italics mine). God showing "complete," likewise, does not imply a limited God but rather a fuller revelation of the Infinite attributes of God. God's completeness is an infinite good. Completeness for man, like Guido's wish to "be whole" (XI, 2056), implies stagnation and death, while incompleteness indicates growth and divine energy. The Pope, therefore, distin-

guishes between the trinity of Pompilia's powers — Love, Creativity, and Saving Strength — and God's. She is finite and therefore incomplete, but in this unfinished state she grows in divine power. Her intelligence is far from infinite. In fact, "it was not given Pompilia to know much/ speak much, to write a book, to move mankind" (X, 1020-21). All men do not recognize her innocence and her strength, as the various monologues point out. And, most importantly, her love is incomplete and therefore growing.

Pompilia's first three experiences with "love" — her birth, her adoption by the Comparini, and her marriage — are all tainted by base motives on the part of other people. However, each produces a greater good in that each stage allows Pompilia's love to mature and grow to a higher state. In each case sexuality, supposedly the finite expression of love, is viewed as an aspect of economic advancement. She was conceived by a prostitute and "he who came/ was wicked for his pleasure, went his way" (VII, 294-95). Her mother sold the unborn child to Violante, in Pompilia's words, "to die the easier by what price I fetched" (VII, 290). However, even in this Pompilia sees some good; "My poor real dying mother... put me from her... also (I hope) because I should be spared sorrow and sin" (VII, 287-92). Violante's motives in buying the child are also questionable. She acts out of love, but a love heavily influenced by her greed;

She thought, moreover, real lies were lies told
 For harm's sake; whereas this had good at heart,
 Good for my mother, good for me, and good
 For Pietro who was meant to love a babe,
 And needed one to make his life of use,
 Receive his house and land when he should die.
 (VII, 306-11)

Violante and Pietro do, however, love Pompilia as if she were

their own child, and Pompilia grows in love and innocence. But, in arranging and allowing the marriage of Pompilia to Guido, and in their abandonment of Pompilia when their household is threatened, their "sorry timid natures" (X, 578) again take precedence. Both Pompilia's parents and Guido place far greater importance on material gain and status than on love. These base motives and acts, however, produce for Pompilia the chance to grow toward divine love with her son and with Caponsacchi.

The love between Caponsacchi and Pompilia is the purest love that can be experienced. In complete contrast to the other "love" she has known, this love transcends all earthly passion and becomes "as the angels... who, apart/ know themselves into one" (VII, 1833-34). The Pope concurs in his judgment, finding Pompilia and Caponsacchi pure "in thought, word, and deed" (X, 1169). This is not to say that sexuality and marriage are evil, but that they belong to a lower stage of growth than that which Pompilia and Caponsacchi have reached. Their love transcends all base motives, and like God's love for man, is free and timeless. Even separated by death, they are united by a stronger bond, and their love continues to grow toward perfect union with God. Caponsacchi, according to the Pope, "one less true... less practised in the right" (X, 1086-87) than Pompilia, must "once more/ work, be unhappy but bear life" (X, 1211-12). Although not yet grown to the height that Pompilia has attained, he has found the way to growth through her love.

In depicting Pompilia as the embodiment of the living Incarnation, the Pope does not see an end to the growth between man and God. She is not the culminating act of incarnation. She is

But repetition of the miracle,
The divine instance of self-sacrifice
That never ends. (X, 1656-58)

Although uncertain of exactly what the future holds for man, how future man will grow and find the light, the Pope is certain that "the light that did burn, will burn!" (X, 1643). What appear now to be "clouds" obscuring the light, "may soothe the eye made blind by blaze/ better the clarity of heaven" (X, 1646-47) in the future. He views everything as tentative and obscure but remains positive in his faith in the living Incarnation and in Pompilia.

Thus Browning's Pope has given us a new symbol, a living symbol of the unity between God and man. He overrules the "new tribunal... higher than God's — the educated man's!" (X, 1976-77) to reaffirm the bond of love between man and God. Browning faced the same type of opposition in his own life. In a time of new scientific discovery, the old religious beliefs and institutions were hard put to remain valid. Browning looked to the past for examples of God's love alive in the world. He looked to the past not to escape, but to

... find an ember, yet unquenched,
And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives,
If precious be the soul of man to man.
(XII, 831-33)

He found his "ember," his symbol in Pompilia and responded through his art, "the one way possible/ of speaking truth" (XII 843-44).

In resuscitating the story of Pompilia and Guido, Browning found more than mere facts," ... bit by bit [he] dug/ the lingot truth... truth thus grasped and gained/ the book was shut and done with" (I, 457-58, 71-72). The truth of the Old Yellow Book was the spirit of the Incarnation alive in Pompilia, the spirit that was still alive for Browning in human experience. Man can yet grow to share in the

Incarnation because Love, Creativity, and Strength transcends all time and all men's laws and scientific discoveries, the "New tribunal" (X, 1976) of the educated man that the Pope overrules. Browning, like the Pope, seemed to be uncertain of the future, but he was certain that the one essential miracle would continue. The traditional images he employs in his poem take on new life as he "starts the dead alive" (I, 733). Christ's Incarnation and Pompilia's incarnation are more than dead truth; they are a living, valid reality that all men can share. Browning found the truth in Pompilia and transformed the facts to "suffice the eye and save the soul beside" (XII, 867).

ENDNOTES

- ¹Bull. of the John Rylands Lib., 27 (June, 1943), 273.
- ²The Life of Robert Browning, revised & edited by Harry C. Minchin, 3rd ed. (1910; rpt. Hamden, Conn., 1966), p. 294.
- ³A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (1935; rpt. New York, 1955), p. 346.
- ⁴Charles W. Hodell, trans., The Old Yellow Book (Washington, 1908); Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Life and Letters of Robt Browning, ed. F. G. Kenyon, 2nd ed. (1891; Boston, 1908); John Marshall Gest, The Old Yellow Book (Boston, 1925); A. K. Cook, A Commentary upon Browning's "The Ring and the Book." (Oxford, 1920). For the most concise summary of the major contentions and arguments see DeVane's Handbook.
- ⁵Hodell, p. 270.
- ⁶PMLA, 71 (1956), rpt. in The Browning Critics, Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker, eds. (Lexington, 1965), p. 308.
- ⁷Princeton Stud. in English, No. 21 (Princeton, 1941), p. 210.
- ⁸The Works of Robert Browning, ed., F. G. Kenyon (1912; rpt. New York, 1966), VI (bk. X, 11. 1285-88), 197. All further quotations from Browning's works will be taken from volumes V and VI of this edition and will be noted according to book and line number in the text.
- ⁹"Browning as Poet of Religion," p. 304.
- ¹⁰VP, 6 (1968), 323-33.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 328.
- ¹²"See the Christ Stand!": Browning's Religion," Boston Univ. Stud. in English, 1 (1955), 72.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 71, N. 49.
- ¹⁴"Browning" (New York, 1957), IV, 132-67.
- ¹⁵Ibid., pp. 146-47.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁷Univ. of Toronto Dept. of English Stud. and Texts, No. 11 (Toronto, 1963), p. v; see also pp. 102-03.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 131-36.

²⁰(Chicago, 1968).

²¹Ibid., p. 212.

²²For various critics views on the effects of E.B.B. on Browning's life and art see DeVane; Griffin; Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven, 1957), pp. 348-53; and F. R. G. Duckworth, Browning: Background and Conflict (New York, 1932).

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