

**THE LAST LEAF: A CRITICAL STUDY OF
"THE MOMENT" IN ROBERT BROWNING'S
LOVE POETRY**

BY

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THE LAST LEAF: A CRITICAL STUDY OF "THE MOMENT"
IN ROBERT BROWNING'S LOVE POETRY

A Research Paper

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Carole Barber Chambers

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Carole Barber Chambers entitled, "The Last Leaf: A Critical Study of 'The Moment' in Robert Browning's Love Poetry." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education, with a major in English.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

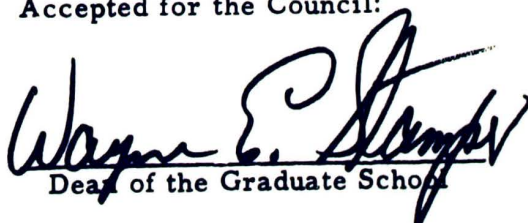

Dean of the Graduate School

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THE LAST LEAF: A CRITICAL STUDY OF "THE MOMENT"

IN ROBERT BROWNING'S LOVE POETRY

I

Introduction

Critics have made much of "the moment" in Robert Browning's love poetry, and most agree that for Browning an attainment of the ultimate in earthly love has this one, singular prerequisite. In spite of long discussions of "the moment" by such critics as William Raymond, Roma King, and Thomas Collins,¹ and in spite of lengthy explications on its sublimity, there is one omission in existing criticism: no one has attempted to explain why only a handful of Browning's lovers attain that necessary and sublime "moment, one and infinite!"²

William Raymond equates his "infinite moment" to one of "electrically charged emotion"³ for which the poet must find artistic

¹William Raymond, The Infinite Moment (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); Roma King, The Focusing Artifice (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1965); Thomas Collins, Browning's Moral-Aesthetic Theory, 1833-1855 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967).

²Robert Browning, "By the Fireside," Poems of Robert Browning, Riverside Edition, ed. Donald Smalley, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956, p. 144. All poems are to this edition.

³Raymond, p. 12.

expression. He apparently chose the phrase because it expresses that inherent conflict between infinite and finite; in addition, his primary thesis rests on the premise that Browning's "live and nervous diction"⁴ should be tolerated as a consequence of infinite passion seeking expression in a finite form. However, Roma King views "the moment" in the traditional sense, specifically as part of the experience of lovers. He says that the moment "fixes their destinies and justifies their lives; it remains real but its immediacy is gone."⁵ Undoubtedly, Thomas Collins best explored the term, describing it as a blending of two souls. He mentions these three consequences of "the moment": it fixes the lovers' course in life; it allows the lovers to attain union with nature; and it results in a spiritual maturity which brings them closer to God.⁶

Within this framework of existing criticism, this writer seeks to explore further the characteristics of "the moment," as a means to uncover why many of Browning's lovers fail to experience it. In general, "the moment" refers to that instant of heightened, joyful sensitivity when two lovers openly acknowledge their love for one

⁴Ibid., p. 12.

⁵King, p. 96.

⁶Collins, pp. 130-131.

another and to the continuing effects of that instant, such as the spiritual bond which should exist and the development of perfect communication.

Therefore, this paper, by a consideration of twenty-four love poems, will show that the dirth of moments for Browning's lovers results from faulty communication. This study focuses upon the personae; it is by their failure that an explanation for the scarcity of "moments" for the lovers can best be demonstrated.

This paper provides for convenient classification of the poems under consideration; the twenty-four poems will be categorized according to the use of "the moment" in each. The first group includes three poems which all indicate that the persona has experienced "the moment" and has made some rewarding and satisfactory use of it; this is the group which will allow the best explanation of the full meaning of Browning's "moment." The second group includes twelve poems in which the persona's love is not returned; these poems suggest that "the moment" concerns a persona who regrets a missed moment or suffers because the moment is not recognized by the loved one. Finally, the last collection contains nine love poems which do not mention "the moment" and do not indicate in any way that such an experience ever occurs for the persona.

II

The Last Leaf

The persona in "By the Fireside" remembers "the moment" of love and bids his beloved Leonor to "Come back with me to the first of all" (XXX.146). In recalling the experience, the speaker relates the nearness of the moment but uses the metaphor of "the last leaf" (XLI-XLIII) to emphasize that no matter how much one may wish for that last leaf to fall, for that last barrier between lovers to drop, one must be patient. He chides us with "But a last leaf--fear to touch?" (XLII.210). One should fear to touch it because such a violation of the integrity of an individual soul destroys the love.

Therefore, a lover must respect his loved one. He should not force the removal of self-protective barriers, no matter how love-stifling they may seem; he should not force a return of love. The persona makes it clear that such actions lead to destruction of "the moment." Accordingly, with the metaphor of "the last leaf," Browning instructs a lover in patience; if "the moment" is to be achieved, both lovers must reach that point of perfect communication when all barriers are dropped, voluntarily.

The speaker remembers that he did not touch that last leaf, and he remembers how vulnerable he was at that point. He tells Leonor:

You might have turned and tried a man,
Set him a pace to weary and wear,
And prove which suited more your plan,
His best hope or his worst despair,
Yet end as he began. (XLV)

In these words the reader senses his total dependence on her reaction to his love. The persona does not hedge; he fully realizes that loving someone completely has its risks. In stanza XLIV he demonstrates the agony of the patience he has urged in the preceding three stanzas; he vividly depicts the desperation of loving without receiving love in return, thereby revealing his awareness of the possibility of a shattering rejection. But the lover must take the risks of loving; the persona says "That a man should strive and agonize, / And taste a veriest hell on earth/ For the hope of such a prize!" (XLIV. 218-220). Nevertheless, the persona is not rejected.

He says, however, that her word alone is not assurance of "the moment!"

But you spared me this, like the heart you are,
And filled my empty heart at a word.
If two lives join, there is oft a scar,
They are one and one, with a shadowy third;
One near one is too far.

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life: we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen. (XLVI. XLVII. 226-235)

They are near, but there remains a "shadowy third" which prevents "the moment." It does not come at her word; he says in the next stanza that "The forests had done it" (XLVIII. 236). This means that not only had all barriers been dropped, but the place and time were exactly right for their union. Also in this stanza he speaks of the

mixing as being permanent, or as he says "for once and good" (XLVIII. 239). And since the mixing is accomplished "In spite of the mortal screen, " it seems that "the moment" is a spiritual experience, as opposed to a physical one.

Actually, the words "the moment" suggest a transitory, fleeting experience; yet seemingly, Browning wished to imply more than this. The persona in "By the Fireside" gives clear evidence that although "the moment" (the time of the experience) is transitory and fleeting, the results of that one supreme instant are permanent. The speaker describes the relationship of the two after "the moment" as one of continuing and growing communication; that is not to say that they talk continuously, for he obviously intends to imply a deeper form of communication than mere words can accomplish. He refers to Leonor as "My perfect wife. . ." (XXI. 101), says that "When I think but deep enough, / You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme" (XXIV. 116-117), and reminds her that "At first, 'twas something our two souls / Should mix as mists do; each is sucked / In each now; on, the new stream rolls, / Whatever rocks obstruct" (XXVI. 127-130).

Thus, the speaker describes the aftermath of "the moment." Thomas Collins expressed his ideas on it in this manner: "They are silent, but the union they have achieved through love enables them to

communicate by means of mutual intuitive understanding."⁷ Also one should note that the image of mixing mists at the beginning of "the moment" becomes a rolling stream. It seems that the persona wishes to assure Leonor that their intuitive understanding has been growing in strength, for certainly the power of mist in the face of obstacles is negligible, but a rolling stream is another matter.

The persona indicates one other result of "the moment"; he sees Leonor as spiritual superior and as guide in such matters. He expresses this desirable aspect of "the moment" in these words:

You must be just before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine. (XLVIII. 138-140)

Later, in Caponsacchi's view of Pompilia, Browning emphasizes again this Beatrice-aspect of "the moment."

In general, then, "the moment" gives evidence that the lover must realize the necessity for respecting the integrity of each individual soul, that he must wait until the loved one voluntarily returns his love, and that the spoken avowal of love will assure "the moment" only if the lovers have chosen a place and a time which will be conducive to their realization of it. If they complete all these points of preparation, the couple will experience, briefly, a sense of immense joy; this implies

⁷Collins, p. 130.

their recognition of an instant of perfect communication, of complete intuitive understanding. According to the speaker in "By the Fireside," this moment is only a beginning. For the perfect, ideal love to be achieved, the persona indicates that the sense of communication must be continued and deepened, so that two individuals, separated by flesh, are mixed and become one, in that each is aware of the other's innermost thoughts, needs, and feelings. He also envisions the lovers as growing in this sense of oneness, this ability to communicate, even to the point that one can provide spiritual inspiration and guidance to the other.

Therefore, when lovers fail to achieve "the moment," they may fail simply to ever experience that brief instant of perfect communication or they may lose their powers of communication rather than increasing them as the lovers in "By the Fireside" do. No other poem so fully expresses the meaning of "the moment," but The Ring and the Book, Books VI and VII, and "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli" deserve to be included as poems with successful moments. In various ways the persona in each utilizes "the moment" in a constructive manner which leads to something good in his life, even though it is not the ideal married life of the lovers in "By the Fireside."

In The Ring and the Book two lovers make successful use of a moment. Giuseppe Caponsacchi and Pompilia experience a moment of

perfect communication when they first meet; he describes it in these words: "As I / Recognized her, a potency of truth, / So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me, / Never mistook the signs . . ."

(VI. 916-919). Even Pompilia recognized this exceptional communication and speaks of it when describing their flight to Rome:

When eve was fading fast, and my soul sank,
And he divined what surge of bitterness,
In overtaking me, would float me back
Whence I was carried by the standing day--
So, --"This gray place was famous once," said he--
And he began that legend of the place
As if in answer to the unspoken fear,
And told me all about a brave man dead,
Which lifted me and let my soul go on! (VII. 1518-1526)

Her reference to "the unspoken fear" is reminiscent of the type of understanding between the "Fireside" lovers. Again the communication arises in silence, words are not needed. Then Pompilia attributes to Caponsacchi the power to lift her soul that is similar to Leonor's spiritual aid to her lover. So two characteristics of "the moment"--communication without words and spiritual inspiration--are present.

"The moment" gives Pompilia courage to flee her husband and to accept her maturing love for Caponsacchi. "The moment" enables her to find an acceptable explanation for her death. Due to her love for him, she calmly faces death; she feels assured that God will receive her, and that eventually Caponsacchi will join her. She refers to Caponsacchi in her last lines of Book VII:

So, let him wait God's instant men call years;
 Meanwhile hold hard by truth and his great soul,
 Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
 God stooping shows sufficient of His light
 For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise. (1824-1828)

Caponsacchi, on the other hand, finds not a way to die through "the moment," but rather a way to live. By his knowledge of Pompilia, he begins to see God as he has never seen him before. As he says in reference to this point:

This raw thing that had been struck into me
 By the look o' the lady, --to dare disobey
 The first authoritative word. 'Twas God's.
 I had been lifted to the level of her,
 Could take such sounds into my sense, I said
 "We two are cognisant o' the Master now;
 She it is bids me bow the head: how true,
 I am a priest (VI. 996-1003)

He no longer views his profession as a practical, convenient method of living in the world. Because of Pompilia's influence, he begins to see the meaning behind the Church, and for the first time is aware of other meanings. In this case each lover sees the other as being of finer quality, and hence, as uplifting spiritually.

The last poem in this very small collection of the "successful moment" poems is "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli." This is the only poem with a lover who makes no attempt to establish communication with the loved one. For a Browning love poem this is exceptional because such inaction on the part of the persona is ordinarily extremely damaging to "the moment" and the overall success of the love.

Although Rudel has never met his Lady, he is unwaveringly faithful to one of the primary tenets of "the moment," that is, he waits. His love of the Lady of Tripoli may be unreturned, but he utilizes his love constructively despite that frustrating fact. Browning conveys the idea that the poet, Rudel, is inspired by his love to write the poems men applaud so much. Therefore, the poem is important for dramatizing a successful utilization of "the moment" by one who meets unreturned love.

So only "By the Fireside" features communication through love achieved and maintained. In The Ring and the Book the lovers experience "the moment" and are able to use the understandings thus gained to better the quality of their lives, though one dies and the other is cast from the priesthood. Then Rudel channels into art his desire for "the moment" with the Lady, resigned to the fact that he will never achieve that ultimate moment of perfect intuitive understanding.

Obviously, one may wonder why "the moment" is of such burning importance in a discussion of Browning's lovers. "The moment" is much like the air; one is not conscious of it because of its abundance; only a lack of air makes its existence so conspicuous. And certainly, Browning's moment is conspicuous by its absence.

III

Failure of "The Moment"

Exactly half of the twenty-four poems under consideration fall into the second category; that is, all in some way refer to a "moment," but in each the persona's love fails. The poems are: "Christina," "Time's Revenges," "Two in the Campagna," "Youth and Art," "Any Wife To Any Husband," "Porphyria's Lover," "A Light Woman," "The Laboratory," "Evelyn Hope," "Serenade at the Villa," "A Woman's Last Word," and "James Lee's Wife." It will be shown that the primary reason for the failures of the personae in these poems is that all fail to establish fruitful communication by using their intuitive powers. Johnson supports this view, saying: "The central problem in Browning's love poetry is invariably one of communication between the sexes. The intangible influences which encourage or destroy intimacy between men and women elicit all his skill in psychological analysis; for love exists in and through human intuitions."⁸

First, "James Lee's Wife" illustrates the cause of unsatisfactory love. The wife reflects that "Summer has stopped" (l. l. 7), indicating that love was present but is now gone. After wondering why the cold must spread, she repeats the image of summer, exclaiming "Whom

⁸E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 101.

Summer made friends of, Let Winter estrange!" (2.IV.81). She affirms that they have love, but throughout the poem she worries more and more about the change in that love. Finally, she leaves her husband, a common occurrence with Browning's lovers: they love, but "the moment" does not produce the lasting, silent, perfect communication achieved by the lovers in "By the Fireside." To James Lee's wife silence is threatening; it does not mean perfect communication or intuitive understanding. She says:

I will be quiet and talk with you
 And reason why you are wrong.
 You wanted my love--is that much true?
 And so I did love, so I do:
 What has come of it all along? (4.I.1-5)

Her ability to "talk" is not communication, just as her "quiet" is only silence to the extent that she does not shout. She immediately assumes that James Lee is at fault, and she plans to point out all his failings. From her clumsy opening remarks in section four, she builds to a biting conclusion which she apparently hopes will be more persuasive, and less irritating, if stated in song. Obviously, if she seriously desires to end the deterioration of love, she chooses a horrible approach. She begins by telling him why he is wrong and terminates her little talk with "How the light, light love, he has wings to Fly / At suspicion of a bond" (4.VIII.117-118). James Lee must bear the burden of blame for the failure of their love.

Roma King argues: "Browning emphasizes less the causes than the inevitability of the separation. Neither James Lee nor his wife can prevent the tragedy which neither desires."⁹ King places too great an emphasis, perhaps, on the inevitability of the separation. Such a view seems inconsistent with Browning's usual inclinations. Additionally, Mrs. Lee's is the only opinion of which one can be sure; certainly she does not think love's end inevitable. From the first line to the last she searches for some way to make James Lee love her as much as she loves him; there is no indication that she feels doomed to failure. One example of this constant desire for his love occurs when she wishes that love might change her in his eyes "til I grew the same / In your eyes, as in mine you stand . . ." (9.II. 341-342).

However, the chief error in King's statement does not concern the inevitability of the separation, but rather his insistence that neither party can prevent it. One characteristic of a true moment is the beginning of understanding; therefore, after the Lees experience "the moment," they should grow in mutual understanding. They do not.

In fact, Mrs. Lee's persistence in deciding what her husband thinks is not the result of understanding his thinking; it merely means that

⁹King, p. 116.

she credits James Lee with ignoble thinking, for which one finds no actual evidence. The implication is that Mrs. Lee feels she has given all, but James Lee has given nothing. Consequently, she wishes to place all blame on James Lee for the failure of love:

Well, you may, you must set down to me
 Love that was life, life that was love;
 A tenure of breath at your lips' decree,
 A passion to stand as your thoughts approve
 A rapture to fall where your foot might be.

But did one touch of such love for me
 Come in a word or a look of yours? (VI., VII. 363-364)

Mrs. Lee states that James has never even looked lovingly at her, but this cry contradicts her earlier statement about the friends of summer. Moreover, there is further evidence of her self-pitying attitude:

There is nothing to remember in me,
 Nothing I ever said with a grace,
 Nothing that I did that you care to see,
 Nothing I was that deserves a place
 In your mind, now I leave you, set you free. (9.I. 333-337)

She never fails to indicate that James is not quite her equal in his power to love. At one point she speaks of him as "just weak earth" (4.IV. 97) in a tone condescending and obsequious:

The man was my whole world, all the same,
 With his flowers to praise or his weeds to blame,
 And, either or both, to love. (4.VI. 109-111)

After all this, it seems clear that James Lee's wife is not powerless to prevent the separation; in fact, she has a great deal of power.

King probably assumes correctly that she does not desire the separation; but however sad, she destroys her relationship with James Lee as she repeatedly acts in a way that is catastrophic for "the moment."

For instance, Browning's ideal love requires that one must respect the integrity of the individual soul. Mrs. Lee failed James in this respect: she never allowed him that freedom of personality that lovers must allow one another. And if one remembers the image of mixed mists in "Fireside," he understands that "the moment" is fragile and ethereal; any slight wind can disperse it. Certainly, Mrs. Lee's attacks on her husband, and thereby on love, are of hurricane proportions! James Lee may have been her "whole world," but Mrs. Lee's inability to realize that her husband needed other interests to fill his world was the destructive wind which blew the mists away and made the world cold. The coldness was not the same as the silence she feared. The coldness was the loss of that ability to sit in complete silence with a loved one and let the love, the sense of touching without touching, warm the heart. Undoubtedly, the warmth in "By the Fireside" did not come from the fire.

Just as Mrs. Lee failed to respect the integrity of the husband's soul, other Browning lovers make the same mistake. In "Cristina," "Porphyria's Lover," "A Light Woman," and "The Laboratory," the personae ignore Browning's injunction--"but a last leaf--fear to

touch!" Each is guilty of trying to force love on another. The extreme examples are Porphyria's lover and the woman in "The Laboratory." In each, the persona commits murder--the ultimate denial of the integrity of another's soul.

Browning wrote four poems--"Any Wife to Any Husband," "Time's Revenges," "Youth and Art," and "Two in the Campagna"--in which intellectualizing leads to communication failure and, consequently, to a failure of "the moment." The clearest example of this type of destruction of "the moment" is to be found in "Two in the Campagna." The persona describes "the moment" in this fashion:

I pluck the rose
And love it more than tongue can speak--
Then the good minute goes. (X. 48-50)

Significantly, the image is that of a plucked rose, hauntingly beautiful, but oh, so transitory! Nothing about this moment differentiates it from other moments in Browning's poetry; the important thing is the persona's reaction to it. He immediately begins to analyze, to question, to reason. He asks, "Already how am I so far / Out of that minute?" (XI. 51-52) In the last stanza he says:

Just when I seemed about to learn!
Where is the thread now? Off again!
The old trick! Only I discern--
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn. (XII. 56-60)

One should notice that this speaker in "Two in the Campagna" speaks of it as a learning experience and then as a trick, as though he were trying to unravel some complicated problem in logic but has lost the thread of it. His reaction should be contrasted to that of the persona in "Fireside" immediately after "the moment," which is one of joy and acceptance of the moment as a unique and fulfilling part of life. So the lover in the campagna has destroyed his moment because its beauty and meaning are lost when the icy winds of intellectualizing blow the mists of perfect communication into oblivion.

In the final analysis, there are two causes for failure of "the moment." Either the persona disregards his partner's personality, or he attempts to intellectualize on an intuitive experience. In the first case, the persona's refusal to recognize the integrity of the individual soul may appear in several forms: he may try to force his love on someone; he may try to force someone to return his love; or he may simply ignore the other person's true personality as he develops his own conception of that person and adheres to this fantasy as though it were reality. In the second case, the persona may approach all the relationships analytically or he may destroy "the moment" by treating it as something other than the intuitional experience that it is.

IV

Unconcern for "The Moment"

In another group of poems, the personae seem unconcerned with that supreme intuitive experience. The poems included in this group are: "In a Gondola," "Confessions," "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning," "Respectability," "My Last Duchess," "Count Gismond," "The Statue and the Bust," and "The Glove." The first five express a joy of living which Browning so often chose to praise.

In the paired poems, "Meeting at Night" and "Parting at Morning," Browning's persona expresses two moods of man. In the first poem the sensual images, such as "the quick sharp scratch / And blue spurt of a lighted match" (II. 9-10), indicate the man's excitement at the meeting. The second poem, by the choice of common, non-sensory images, sets the right mood; the man sees love as only a part of life and is ready to return to the world. Love is a glorious physical experience for this man, not a spiritual union.

This type of attitude is best described in "Confessions" where the persona has no regrets at having grasped love when he had the opportunity: "How sad and bad and mad it was-- / But then, how it was sweet" (IX. 35-36). "In a Gondola" also reflects this attitude toward love; it is joyous but earthly. The speaker makes no suggestion that this is the ideal love, only that it is enjoyable and that man should

follow the dictates of his heart, not society's, in matters of love. Roma King echoes this view of the poem, saying: "'In a Gondola,' melodramatic, perhaps sentimental, is nevertheless a clear presentation of Browning's early conviction that life is measured in intensity rather than in time; that goodness is fidelity to one's inmost being rather than conformity to external codes."¹⁰

Apparently, these first five poems involve personae who are concerned with that side of love which does not require the soul's complicity, only a light heart and faith in one's ideals. These poems seem to extol the virtues of physical love, in spite of social restraints; therefore, these personae are not dealing with the graver depths of love, that is, "the moment." Recall that all five of the poems were written before 1846, the year he married Elizabeth Barrett.¹¹ Browning was probably not concerned at the time he wrote these poems with the effects of love on man's soul.

Among other poems in this section, "My Last Duchess," "Count Gismond," and "The Statue and the Bust" could, of course, be written off as just so many more pleas by Browning for "fidelity" in the face of rigid society. Yet it seems reasonable to argue that "the moment" could not occur because in each case one of the characteristics of "the

¹⁰King, p. 72.

¹¹Browning, p. xxvii.

moment" is lacking. For example, the Duke with his "nine-hundred-years-old name" (33) and his disgust that just anyone could call up "that spot of joy" (21) could easily be denied "the moment" on practically every point. He fails to respect the integrity of the Duchess' soul; he misunderstands and misuses the word love; he destroys the Duchess as well as love.

"The Glove" illustrates how faulty communication results in failure of "the moment." Although the poem never mentions the experience, it gives a working model for love as an intuitive, individual experience as opposed to society's ritualistic, formalized love code. This is the principal problem also in "My Last Duchess," "Count Gismond," and "The Statue and the Bust."

In "The Glove" two personae are of importance, Sir De Lorge and the lady. De Lorge claims that he loves the lady, and she tests his sincerity. She says:

Too long had I heard
Of the deed proved alone by the word:
For my love--what De Lorge would not dare!
With my scorn--what De Lorge could compare!
And the endless descriptions of death
He would brave when my lip formed a breath. (121-126)

The result of the test is failure. Although De Lorge braves the lion to get her glove, he does so not for love but for honor, measured on the scale of society's approval or disapproval.

On the other hand, the lady has the courage to throw the glove, but not, as the king says, for "mere vanity" (101). Although she has the glove tossed in her face "Amid the Court's scoffing and merriment, --" (107), she has no regrets. Where De Lorge acted as society decreed, she trusted her intuitive powers, not society's rituals. She dared test the easy, empty words, and society's scorn was a small price to pay for the truth of the heart.

It was, as the lady points out, a poor test of love, but De Lorge proved to be of such inferior spiritual fiber that the test was enough for him. Of course, Browning manages a nice fairy-tale ending where the scoundrel gets his just desserts and the lady finds true love, but this ending is not the central truth of the poem. The lady, as befits a Browning lover, seeks an intuitive knowledge of the loved one. She desires the truth about De Lorge's feeling for her, not words alone. He weighed "out with a nonchalance / Fine speeches like gold from a balance" (89-90). However, she found the "finest prove copper" (113) when "tried in a crucible" (111). Words then are not necessarily truth. When the lady tested De Lorge's speeches she found these outward avowals of love to be only part of society's ritual of romance. As so often is the case, perfect communication was not indicated by the presence of words of love. Perfect communication may mean no words; they are not necessary for those who have achieved "the moment."

After all, Browning's lovers are more apt to find love to be like a lion than a well-mannered lap dog. Love is an untamed, sometimes terrifying emotion, and when the lady speaks of the lion one feels the implication that love, too, once functioned without gloves, pretty speeches, and society's arbitrary boundaries. She says:

When I looked on your lion, it brought
 All the dangers at once to my thought,
 Encountered by all sorts of men,
 Before he was lodged in his den, --
 From the poor slave whose club or bare hands
 Dug the trap, set the snare on the sands,
 With no King and no Court to applaud,
 By no shame, should he shrink, overawed,
 Yet to capture the creature made shift,
 That his rude boys might laugh at the gift. (133-142)

This could be read as a denunciation of courtly love and as a call for a little more honest emotion in this most intimate of human relationships.

So the lady's attempt to reach a full understanding of De Lorge results in a complete lack of communication between them. If he had responded to her test, by realizing that she only desired to communicate with him on more than the formalized and superficial level prescribed by society, "the moment" could have occurred.

Generally, the poems in this group deal with personae who either do or do not follow society's codes of love. Those who follow the rules ignore their inner need for an intuitive response to love, resulting in unhappy and wasted lives. Those who seek and answer from the heart often find themselves diametrically opposed to society which may

punish their departure from the expected. Many of the poems in this latter group express the joy, particularly the physical joy, of love. None of these poems specifically mention "the moment."

V

Conclusion

As section IV illustrates, the lovers who have no knowledge of "the moment" are those limited to an idea of love in its physical sphere or those bound by social values antithetical to full appreciation of the meaning of human love. Section III dealt with those lovers who know of "the moment," but in some way fail to achieve it in the fullest sense of the term. Those lovers either fail to respect the integrity of the loved one's soul or intellectualize to the point of obliterating "the moment." The lovers of section II achieved "the moment" and made successful use of the experience.

Significantly, the principal cause of failure of "the moment" in every case has been a failure of communication. Of course, the last statement is practically redundant since perfect communication is the essence of "the moment." In truth, "the moment" is simply a phrase which symbolizes not only that instant of perfect communication, but the many moments which should follow it. The lovers must, by their own will, maintain that intuitive understanding; it is their failure to do so that results in so many lovers wondering, "Where is the thread

now?" ("Campagna". XII. 57).

Collins concurs with such a reading, saying of Browning:

He celebrates love as the power which allows man to use flesh as a medium through which that "vision" can be realized. Some lovers fail in this movement to higher values either because their love experience is thwarted, . . . or because they can triumph only momentarily over the grinding mortal power which oppresses love. Others . . . succeed because they also realize that in their imperfections created things can serve as instruments which ultimately lead, through human love, to a fuller appreciation of spiritual perfection.¹²

But in spite of the possibilities for spiritual development through human love, most of Browning's lovers do not succeed. As King says, "Even love, the noblest of passions, Browning seems to say, is capable only rarely, and then momentarily, of giving man the experience of meaning and value."¹³

Accordingly, the rarity of complete and perfect love in Browning's love poetry results from man's essential incapacity to open the avenues of communication. After all, it is only natural to cling to "the last leaf"; it is only natural to wish to impose one's own conception of another upon that person; it is only natural to cling to the forms and values of society; it is only natural, in this, the most compartmentalized and educated of worlds, to intellectualize relationships. But all

¹²Collins, p. 136.

¹³King, p. 115.

these things are positively catastrophic for the one supreme
 "moment."

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