PIPPA PASSES... GENERIC DISTINCTIONS

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Abstract. Robert Browning's *Pippa Passes*, published in 1841, is a key work in his general oeuvre, but it is frequently overlooked by critics intent on analysing the anthologised poems of the following collections. The aim of this article is to reassert the importance of the poem by reassessing what is one of Browning's most daring experiments with genres. First, the polyphonic quality of *Pippa Passes* resides in the polymorphic aspect of its elusive generic identity and its ever-recomposing structure. The poem rests on echoes and reversals of perspective which tie it together. Moreover, the dramatization of the characters' voices is illustrated by a wide array of modalities. Finally, the central character Pippa sings songs which trigger an existential crisis for those who hear them. This identity crisis manifests itself by a crisis of speech, which, in the process, paves the way for irony and parody.

Key words: Robert Browning, *Pippa Passes*, polyphony, generic identity, irony

Pippa Passes is a key work, a bridge, as underscored by Chesterton in his monograph on the poet: 'In 1841 *Pippa Passes* appeared, and with it the real Browning of the modern world' (Chesterton, 1925: 43). Adapting Hair's thesis developed in *Browning's Experiments with Genre* (Hair, 1972), this article intends to reassert the importance of *Pippa Passes* in the Browning canon by showing how the poem is in itself a major poetic experiment. Combined with its polyphonic quality, the polymorphic nature of *Pippa Passes* makes it a crucial poem *per se*, but also in order to study Browning's formal quest that was to lead him to the collection of *Dramatic Lyrics* published in 1842. The modalities of speech that are dramatized in the poem pave the way for parody and far-reaching irony.

As he composes *Pippa Passes*, Browning is also busy writing for the stage (he has already published *Strafford* in 1837 and he is writing *King Victor and King Charles*, published in 1842), and he moves away from the more lyrical forms of *Pauline* (1833) and *Sordello* (published just a year before *Pippa Passes*). Indeed, if on the one hand the poem belongs to what Honan calls 'Character for the study' (Honan, 1961: 78), on the other this poem marks the start of Browning's evolution towards a new double form, both lyrical *and* dramatic. Just as in *A Soul's Tragedy*, the title indicates the projection of the tragedy onto the interiority of the individual and not the exteriority of a group, here the two words of the title suggest an ambivalence, depending on whether the stress is placed on the first or second word: the proper noun *Pippa* seems to announce a psychological study; on the other hand, the active verb and the absolute construction, *Passes*, implies an open-ended, indeterminate action. In this respect, Pippa's career is,

of course, symbolic, an objective correlative to her status in the poem: the little weaver in the town of Asolo is that which ties together, by her presence alone, not only individuals, but also ideas and speech. The synoptic view allows the reader to put the various episodes into perspective and to discern from amongst them a series of ironic oppositions. From this ironic structure, often misunderstood, has originated much disagreement among critics and condemnation for a work decried as much for its unrealistic subject as for its loose structure. For example, an article in the *Athanaeum* deplores the absence of unity of action (Litzinger, 1970: 74). Erickson (1984: 75–6) and King echo this criticism: 'The drama is plotless' (King, 1968: 49).

Yet such analyses do not take into account the play on echoes and the reversals of perspective on which rests the polyphonic structure of *Pippa Passes*. Generally speaking, the misunderstanding surrounding *Pippa Passes* greatly resembles that faced by *Sordello*, a poem with a generic identity which is just as fickle. Indeed, Pippa incites the reader to a more profound reading while challenging him to: 'task your wits' (Introduction, 82). *Pippa Passes* shows a dramatization of voice and of the ambiguity of its impact. Each episode illustrates one or several modalities of voice on a range which includes the spoken, the written, poetry, prose, and songs, intertwining them in a polyphony. What is also of importance is that Pippa sings songs which trigger an existential crisis for those who hear them. This identity crisis manifests itself by a crisis of speech which turns in on itself to produce parody and irony.

'TO PRODUCE FORM OUT OF UNSHAPED STUFF' (*PIPPA PASSES*, 2. 298)

The structure of *Pippa Passes* is a Protean one, always in movement: it is, according to Ryals, a poem 'in becoming' (Ryals, 1983: 6). It is comprised of a prologue entitled 'Introduction' for the 1888 edition and an epilogue (not referred to as such) which frame the four 'parts' (as they are named in 1888) – the second scene of the final act constituting the epilogue. Each part is divided into two scenes (so called in 1888, not named as such in 1841 but separated by a dash and stage directions): a tragic episode interrupted by one of Pippa's songs, and a conversation on the road ('talk by the way', as it is called by Browning). The piece might at first sight seem to have a broken, fragmentary structure: if Pippa's monologues frame and give rhythm to the play, there is no explicit relation between the first and second part of each scene. This description is already sufficient however to show the importance of Pippa as a character: the action is based on her passage, she weaves the action and gives impetus to its unfolding. To better determine the polyphonic architecture of *Pippa Passes*, it is useful to study its structure in greater detail, a structure which is far from being as absent as has been claimed by the critics, and to recall the insightful words of Chesterton: 'though few of his followers will take Browning's form seriously, he took his own literary form very seriously' (Chesterton, 1925: 44).

First of all, Pippa's song frames the whole poem, introducing and concluding it in nearly identical words, forming an epanadiplosis, which suggests a circular structure. In the prologue, Pippa names all the characters who will appear in each of the four parts, thus creating within the mind of the reader a horizon of expectation (these are 'Asolo's four happiest people', Introduction, 41), and furnishing him with a grid for the reading. Her songs act as a refrain within the narrative fabric and constitute a repetition contributing to the structure. Moreover, the poem respects the three unities: the place is the village of Asolo; the four parts progress to the rhythm of the four times of day ('morning', 'noon', 'evening', 'night'), pointing again towards a circular structure. The title indicates that the action rests on the passing of Pippa, nominally present in every scene.

In as much as the four parts are not immediately or directly related, each one possesses the same organization allowing the reader to grasp its components and inner configuration: an introduction, Pippa's passage, a conclusion. Indeed, a preparatory scene in the form of a 'talk by the way', formally integrated into one part, announces and launches the plot of the following part. These preparatory scenes, comprised of non-recurring secondary characters (students, Austrian police, poor young girls), provide a backdrop and several contrasts (whether they be dramatic, linguistic, or ironic) to the episodes which ensue: whereas the listeners perceive a prescriptive dimension in Pippa's song, within the 'talks by the way', the words uttered have a descriptive value.

Each scene picks up and extends the plot of the previous scene. Whereas Pippa is already the main character, who knows all of the protagonists (she names them in her opening song), certain characters are mentioned in the episodes where they do not appear. Thus, in addition to the introduction (120), old Lucca is brought up by the guilty lovers (1. 1. 53), then by the police in the second part, who point out his house (2. 2. 37, 363–9), and finally in Pippa's conclusion (4. 2. 25). These same policemen speak with Bluphocks, first mentioned by a student in the first part, then by the young girls (3. 2. 316–9), and lastly by Ugo (4. 1. 151–3) and Pippa, who is fascinated by this character's name and physical appearance. At the same time, Jules, quoted in the introduction and conclusion by Pippa, appears in one episode; he is mentioned again in the fourth part when Monsignor reads to his 'intendant' a letter he has just received from Jules. In addition to this unity woven by Pippa, who acts as a kind of shuttle in the fabric pulling together all of these elements, the poem also possesses thematic and symbolic unity. Love is unfolded on a rising scale: from adulterous love (Sebald-Ottima), we move to the love of a married couple (Jules-Phene), then to the love of mother and mother-country (Luigi and his mother), and lastly to Christian love (Monsignor). Pippa shows a fifth aspect of love: the love of God for all creatures, even the humblest.

After having been, as many others were, puzzled by the poem ('"Pippa Passes"… comprehension, I was going to say', as she wrote to Miss Mitford [letter from July 14, 1841, in Kelley and Hudson, 1984, 5: 75]), Elizabeth Barrett praised '[the poem's] unity & nobleness of conception' in a letter dated October 18, 1842 (ibid., 6: 111). In 1845, when she asked Browning about the meaning behind

Bells and Pomegranates of which *Pippa Passes* constituted the first issue, the latter answered: 'The Rabbis make Bells & Pomegranates symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the Gay & the Grave, the Poetry & the Prose, Singing and Sermonizing – [...] a mixture of effects' (letter from October 18, 1845, ibid., 11: 131). This intertwining of effects contributes to the polyphonic structure of the work which continually oscillates between the lyrical and the dramatic.

HYBRIDISM

The title, depending on the word that is stressed, implies going back and forth between a psychological study of Pippa and the action. The ambiguity of genre was present from the beginning as Browning only subtitled *Pippa Passes* 'a Drama' in 1849. *Pippa Passes*, a work balancing itself on a tightrope, remains inter-generic.

The verbal aspect of *Pippa Passes* is first of all dramatic. The poem opens by stage directions indicating place and main characters. A list entitled 'Persons' (or *dramatis personae*, which is the title of Browning's 1864 work) precedes the poem for the last edition published while Browning was still alive, in 1888. Numerous stage directions punctuate the poem, introducing scenes and conversations on the way. As in the other plays, external stage directions are combined with internal ones (Tholoniat, 2009: 55–57), as when Ottima speaks for the first time to Sebald: 'Mind how you grope your way, though! / [...] Push the lattice / Behind that frame! – Nay, do I bid you? – Sebald, / It shakes the dust down on me! Why, of course / The slide-bolt catches.' (1. 1. 7–11). Stage directions play an important part up to the very end of *Pippa Passes* as they simultaneously follow Pippa's final monologue and literally have the last word of the poem.

This day is a very particular one, as it is Pippa's annual day of rest. On this festive day, she proposes to abolish the boundaries between reality and fiction: 'am I not, this Day, / Whate'er I please? Who shall I seem to-day?' (Introduction, 80–1). She chooses to embody the four happiest people of Asolo – Ottima ('I am Ottima, take warning', 85), Phene (102–3), Luigi (131–2), and Monsignor (144–5), because 'tomorrow I must be Pippa who winds silk, / The whole year round' (107). By referring to herself in the third person, she is represented as playing her own role, that of 'Pippa, Asolo's little weaver'. At the end of the day and the poem, she assesses the hours spent: 'I have just been the holy Monsignor: / And I was you too, Luigi's gentle mother, / And you too, Luigi!' (41–3).

Following the example of Pippa, the aspiring actress, the other protagonists literally put themselves on stage. The first episode introduces Ottima and her lover Sebald, who has just killed Lucca, his master and his mistress' husband. Sebald is at first content with his crime of passion, but the romantic hero cannot stand having been treated generously by the man he killed (1. 1. 140–7). He suggests putting an end to this masquerade: 'Let us throw off / This mask: [...] Let's out / With all of it' (1. 1. 40–2). Ottima wishes to pursue this game of deception and uses euphemisms to refer to the situation, incurring Sebald's disapproval: 'Lucca was

a wittol, / I am his cut-throat, you are... [...] What are you?' (1. 1. 53–7). Sebald is interrupted by Pippa's song which deeply moves him, and from then on he sees in Ottima the equivalent of a Beautiful Lady without Pity. As for him, he casts himself in the role of penitent: 'Oh I am proud to feel / Such torments' (1. 1. 266–7).

In the second episode, Jules appears in the garb of the idealistic artist, on a quest for the 'human archetype' (2. 1. 86). He assigns Phene with the role of living painting, or the reincarnation of his ego: 'I could / Change into you, beloved!' (2. 1. 9–10). In his fiery speech (2. 1. 1–115), Jules continues the illusion; in order to do this, like Sebald, he delivers a monologue and speaks instead of the other person in the scene. But the end of this love story which seems inspired by a fairy tale has been written without Jules' knowledge. Phene, repeating the text that the students taught her, shatters this illusion. Due to Pippa's song, Jules decides to change his role and assume that of Pygmalion.

In 'Evening', Luigi plays the part of martyr for his nation, according to the Horatian adage '*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*'. His costume is ready: 'a handsome dress [...] / White satin here, to set off my black hair; / I have rehearsed it all / [...] a hundred times' (3. 1. 104–11). As in a scene from an opera (Ryals, 1983: 127), he desires to finish his act with a grand cry of 'Italy, Italy, my Italy! / You're free, you're free !' (3. 120–1). His being put to death is absolutely necessary for the proper unfolding of his scene: 'Escape? To even wish that, would spoil all. / The dying is best part of it' (3. 1. 64–5). The stage directions place his mother in the role of the grief-stricken mother, a *mater dolorosa* ('the lady and her child', Introduction, 57). When Luigi hears Pippa's song, he interprets it in a way which but strengthens his conviction, before dashing forth with the resolution of Don Quixote against the windmills.

In the last part, Monsignor, who has been reduced to his religious title of a bishop, reveals his connection to Pippa, his niece. If Monsignor has only a social mask, his intendant has many identities (Ugo, Uguccio, Maffeo, 4. 1. 12–4, 68), and they want to each impose his scenario on the other. Pippa's song makes Monsignor drop the reserve befitting his character, and he orders his people to stop his intendant. He once again assumes his role of bishop by chanting '*Miserere mei, Domine*!' (4. 1. 178).

As a counterpoint to this dramatic dimension of the poem, numerous songs (those of Pippa, Sebald, and the poor young girls) contribute to the lyrical vein of *Pippa Passes*. It might be said that *Pippa Passes* is the one work of Browning which most closely resembles opera. Four excerpts were published separately in 1865 under the title *Songs from* Pippa Passes: 'You'll love me yet!' (3. 297–308) and 'Give her but a least excuse to love me!' (2. 195–210); 'A king lived long ago' (3. 163–224), which had been published in the *Monthly Repository* in 1835, and 'The year's at the spring' (1. 215–22) entitled *Romance from* Pippa Passes. Browning asked Eliza Flower to put these four songs to music. In a letter to Eliza Flower on March 9, 1840, Browning wrote: '[I] mean to song-write, play-write forthwith' (Kelley and Hudson, 1984, 4: 256). The inclusion of songs would make

the work very much like the *masque* genre: with the small reservation that during Elizabethan and Jacobean times, such shows were frequently accompanied by dances.

In addition to the initial stage directions, the work opens by a poem with an extremely dense sonorous architecture:

> Day!
> Faster and more fast
> O'er night's brim day boils at last;
> Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim
> Where spurting and supprest it lay – [...]

The variety of meter, the organization of the rhymes, the rhythm, and the tones saturate the poetic intensity. The rhyme scheme is unusual: a b b c a c a a d e e d, and continues on in staggered intervals. After the first two lines, four stressed syllables per line is established as the model before the ninth line where a fifth stressed syllable breaks the rhyme scheme, which in turn is modified by the final hexameter (line 12). Iambic and trochaic rhythms irregularly accompany spondees ('night's brim day boils', 'Boils, pure gold', 'cloud-cup's brim'). The *sprung rhythm* of G. M. Hopkins is foreseeable in moments like these. Alliterations and assonances abound and enrich the rhythm and the web of imagery.

These lyrical effects contribute to the dramatic dimension by underscoring Pippa's energy in 'springing from the bed' (as is announced by the stage directions), all with the excitement of taking advantage of her annual day of rest: the liberty of the line reflects Pippa's state of mind.

Later, the variety of verbal situations is embodied in the succession of rhymed and blank verse, by the alternation between verse and prose, as well as the play between the written and the spoken in the fourth part, all these phenomena contributing to place the speakers in very different speech situations.

The verse-prose alternation underscores dramatic counterpoints. The episode with the students recounts a conversation in prose and announces the second part which opens by the blank verse of Jules, followed by that of Phene. But the latter recites the doggerels of the mocking students – which she interrupts by her commentary in blank verse. Finally, the metrical scheme is once again modified by Pippa's song.

Browning also alternates between the written and the spoken. In the fourth part, Monsignor reads aloud a letter to his intendant (4. 37–46). The excerpt of the letter is placed in quotation marks to indicate a switch-over in the speaker's authority, but at the same time Monsignor reports Jules' words in an indirect style: '"He never had a clearly conceived Ideal [...]"', thus creating a switch and producing a back and forth motion between Jules' words and his own.

If the hybrid work that is *Pippa Passes* had to be attached to a genre, it would be that of pastiche, in the etymological and figurative sense (from Italian *pasticcio*) which refers to a collection of various elements, a medley, a sense that is found in

the musical domain where it refers to an opera formed from a collection of airs borrowed from other works. Indeed, *Pippa Passes* offers a profusion of styles, as much lyrical as dramatic, to borrow from Browning's own terminology used in the title of his 1842 volume. From one scene to the next, monologues alternate with dialogues, combining the written, the spoken, prose, verse, and songs, as well as English, Italian, and Latin. The farcical and erotic aspects of the Sebald-Ottima episode ('Sebald, as we lay / Rising and falling only with our pants', 1. 1. 205–6) give way to Jules' hazing, and the picaresque episode with Luigi is followed by the cynicism of Monsignor's intendant.

THE DRAMATIZATION OF LANGUAGE

Voice is unfolded under many modalities which are as emphasized as they are separated from one another by a voice heard as both song and refrain. Let us attempt a list: the voice of seduction (Ottima), the voice of regret (Sebald), in the first part; the banter of the mocking students arouses the forgiving voice of Jules, after the naïve, remote-controlled, or even ventriloquized voice of Phene – a phenomenon which assumes a function proper to the scene, thus producing a kind of play within a play. Indeed, the deceitful voice of Ugo clashes with the tired, hoarse voice of Monsignor. Each vignette puts a different modality of voice on stage, from the dramatic 'I love you' in the Sebald-Ottima episode, to the creative power of the word with Jules, to the attempted blackmail by the intendant. Luigi's speech contains a vocation: ''Tis God's voice calls' (3. 1. 229), and Pippa's songs display an illocutionary force in relation to most of the other characters.

Yet, the multiplicity of these voices and their modalities hides per contra an absence of dialogue, which is drawn towards monologue, despite the presence of several speakers. Thus Sebald, after the revelation caused by Pippa's song, speaks by himself; Jules speaks for one hundred and fifteen lines before allowing Phene to speak, who, in response, addresses him mechanically with a text she has memorized but not at all understood. In the same way, Pippa is hardly conscious of the effects of her words on those who hear them. As a result, and contrary to the normal thesis that holds that Pippa's words are all triggers, it might be wondered whether they have any real effect on her listeners.

Instead of positing that Pippa's song produces a crisis, it is more precise to say that it separates two crises: initially, an identity crisis for one or several characters, and later, a new development of this identity. This identity crisis is translated linguistically by a redefinition of words. The crisis of the first act manifests itself through a desire to destroy language, by censure ('Best never speak of it', 1. 1. 42), by euphemisms (51, 101) for Ottima and by the exhausting of language for Sebald: 'Best speak again and yet again of it / Till words cease to be more than words' (43–4). Sebald suddenly rebels against the linguistic fiction that they have both constructed. Ottima's words no longer have the value he had granted them

up until then: 'such cant!' (52). He no longer sees himself as the valiant knight who has just rescued a damsel in distress, but rather as the vulgar murderer of Ottima's husband: 'am I not his cut-throat ? What are you?' (57). At the moment when the couple is able to re-establish its linguistic fiction ('Crown me your queen, […] / Say that!', 218) Pippa's song once again upsets their relationship to language. In his words, Sebald splits up Ottima's body, undermining the function of the feminine blazon in his beloved. The latter pleads with him: 'Speak to me – not of me!' (247), 'Lean on my breast – not as a breast' (274). Language disintegrates at the same time as their identity gradually vanishes: 'Do but kill me – then / Yourself – then – presently – first hear me speak' (Ottima, 271–2), 'My brain is drowned now – quite drowned' (Sebald, 277).

The identity crisis felt by Jules makes him lose his inspiration (2. 1. 303–4). But it is in the end beneficial because it obliges him to redefine his artistic projects: 'To begin Art afresh' (2. 1. 318). Words are lacking to Luigi, commanded by his mother to justify his desire to sacrifice to save Italy: 'He has… they have… in fact, I understand / But can't restate the matter' (3. 1. 142–3). Pippa's song provides him with grounds for acting, which he soon seizes; ostensibly as a response to his mother. As for Monsignor, doubly hindered in speech by his cough and by the specious rhetoric of his intendant, when Pippa's song dramatically pulls him out of his torpor, it is only to let loose a flood of uncontrolled words – this sudden logorrhea is graphically shown by suspension points and numerous dashes. Monsignor's performative aiming at the arrest of his intendant would not exist without Pippa: he has but one word to say, but Pippa speaks before him.

Against the widely accepted opinion holding that Pippa's songs modify the feeling each of her listeners has about himself, these songs are but the opportunity for each listener to confirm what he wishes to hear. It is only in this sense that the songs act as true vehicles of revelation by freeing what remains unspoken in each situation: the listeners look to them for signs which confirm the destiny that they have already chosen for themselves, like Sebald, Luigi, or Jules, who no longer listen to their interlocutor but rather echo their own voice.

They all interpret the words of the songs according to their own desires. Sebald looks more to reformulate his honour than his morality, being more interested in his image as romantic lover than in the horror of his crime; Jules' generosity towards Phene is limited by his desire to fashion her in his image; Luigi's revolutionary enthusiasm is stained by his desire for personal glory; finally, due to his imminent death, Monsignor is hastened to see his resolutions to their end. Pippa modifies no one but instead reveals the characters to themselves, or, in the words of Ryals: 'In the end each of the protagonists in the four episodes is left alone with his self-conceived role' (Ryals, 1983: 130).

This search for meaning by the characters in each episode offers us less the portrait of the thing observed than of the observer: the point of voice is a point of view (Tholoniat, 2009: 48), as is illustrated by Pippa who is able, on this unusual day, to have a synoptic point of view by putting herself in the place of the others.

PARODY AND IRONY

The ultimate irony of the songs of the prologue and the epilogue is that they work on Pippa with the same effect that they have on the other characters, also without her being aware. Far from being 'God's puppets', as Pippa says, each one is rather a puppet to his own desires and to his ability to formulate them. This is plainly to be seen for instance in the confrontation between Monsignor and his intendant.

> *Intendant.* 'Forgive us our trespasses?'
> *Monsignor.* My friend, it is because I avow myself a very worm, sinful beyond measure, that I reject a line of conduct you would applaud, perhaps. Shall I proceed, as it were, a-pardoning? – I? – who have no symptom of reason to assume that aught less than my strenuousest efforts will keep myself out of mortal sin, much less, keep others out. No: I do trespass, but will not double that by allowing you to trespass.
> (4. 110–118)

If, according to the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'irony is the bad conscience of hypocrisy' (Jankélévitch, 2011: 122), the irony here occurs not so much between the bishop and his servant, but above their shoulders, as it were, between Browning and his reader, and it is done at the expense of the two characters and their respective hypocrisy. In the end, apart from the character of Pippa, it is perhaps the irony impregnating each episode that produces the unity of *Pippa Passes*.

The successive sequences put on stage couples (Jules-Phene and Sebald-Ottima) or institutions oppose each other in counterpoint. Comparison and putting in perspective unveils the relativity of positions embodied by these characters. Inside each sequence, language is parodied by reflecting on itself according to the doubts expressed. Sebald mocks Ottima by reducing the range of her words to a language of bad faith ('such cant', 1. 1. 52). The students parody the bombastic, pedantic style of Jules, as Luigi's mother ridicules her son's arguments. The intendant takes up Monsignor's words to poke fun: 'as you say, howsoever, wheresoever, and whensoever'. The perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962: 101) is very well perceived by Monsignor who reacts to the insolence by slapping the mocking intendant. Finally it seems that parody is transformed into self-parody. Indeed, upon meeting Jules, the students utter criticisms that sounded only too familiar to Browning's ears: 'His own fault, the simpleton! Instead of cram couplets, each like a knife in your entrails, he should write [...] classically and intelligibly' (1. 1. 297–300). The officious meta-discourse interferes as counterpoint with the official discourse, and language plays on itself by taking itself as an object of discussion, throwing itself into an ironic perspective.

The absence of a relationship among the sequences, on the one hand, and the repetition of the structure (crisis, Pippa's arrival, resolution, in one way or another, of the crisis) on the other, leads the reader to consider the irony which

arises from juxtaposition. The fragmentary structure of the poem, the ambivalence of each episode, and the strategy of employing parody further dramatize this irony. The characters in the episodes are not, and are far from being, the happiest people in Asolo, as Pippa claims in the Introduction (41). When Pippa refers to 'puppets' (4. 114), it is she, 'the little silk-winder from Asolo', who holds the strings, albeit involuntarily: indeed, she is unaware of the effects of her passage. The reader, who sees the co-existence of opposing things, is on guard for a plurality of interpretations: 'What other meaning do these verses bear?' (v. 189). The characters struggle in situations where all liberty is denied at the very moment when they believe to be exercising it. Does this irony not also include the reader, charged with, at his own risk, interpreting the twists of the plot for himself?

Overall, *Pippa Passes* is a polyrhythmic ensemble, where stylistic hybridism, shifts in style, and the articulation of the episodes throw the poem into a perpetual flight to the finish. By this tapestry of styles, Browning opens his playwriting with a variety of tones. The extreme diversity of the vocal palette and above all an uncommon theatrical sense anticipate the polyphonic structure of *The Ring and the Book*. In this transitional work, Browning blends the constraints of the theatre and lyrical poetry, creating a new part-dramatic, part-lyrical genre, which, by the juxtaposition of sequences, requires the reader's sympathy ('a work like mine depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success', as he claimed in the 1835 preface to *Paracelsus*) and ironic judgment at the same time. In the canon of Browning, as in that of works of the 19th century, *Pippa Passes* is, like *Sordello*, this other experimental work, a unique work which fulfills the wishes of Elizabeth Barrett: 'A great dramatic power may develop itself otherwise than in the formal drama; & I have been guilty of wishing, before this hour... that you wd give the public a poem unassociated directly or indirectly with the stage' (Kintner, 1969, 1: 10).

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