

BROWNING'S "ESSAY ON SHELLEY" AND "CHILDE ROLAND
TO THE DARK TOWER CAME": MYTHOPOEIA AND THE WHOLE POET

The following essay focuses on two works that Browning wrote in the winter of 1851-1852: the "Essay on Shelley," completed in December, 1851, and "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,'" of the following month. It has become axiomatic that Roland's passage to the tower is an analogue of the interpretative action of language. Geoffrey Hartman writes: "to adapt Browning's Childe Roland, what in the midst lay but language itself?"¹ According to Harold Bloom's repeated readings of the poem, Roland is a figure of the poet.² During the 1970s, however, there continued another line of comment which ignores both these assertions.³ In this essay I shall argue that Roland figures Shelley in a precise way.⁴

Julian and Maddalo, discussed by Browning in the Essay on Shelley is relevant;⁵ Like "'Childe Roland'" it emphasizes a tower, the tower of an island madhouse.⁶ In the asylum lives a dejected lover, now become an insane musician. In Venice in the summer of 1851, Browning had taken the trouble to identify the tower (l. 102) of Shelley's poem, which is that of San Clemente, south of the Giudecca (ES, p. 685n).⁷ Nothing could be further from the alternative image of Venice as a creation magical and human that Julian describes in Shelley's poem:

...from that funereal bark
I leaned, and saw the city, and could mark
How from their many isles, in evening's gleam,
Its temples and its palaces did seem
Like fabrics of enchantment piled to heaven.
(ll. 88-92)

Even today no one who stands in the small garden in front of the "dreary pile" (l. 101) of San Clemente is likely soon to forget it. The visible contradiction between it and Venice proper suggests an ironic view of the capacity of men to create buildings -- and institutions. This political irony -- important in Shelley's poem -- also plays a significant part in the despondency of Browning's poem.⁸

The Essay on Shelley is best known for the distinction that Browning draws in it between two sorts of poet: the objective and the subjective. Browning sees the work of the objective poet as tending to conceal the poet; objective poetry is dramatic in character, "projected from...and distinct" (ES, p. 672) from the poet and directed "to the common eye," (ES, p. 671); i.e., towards common sense. The subjective poet, on the other hand, writes poetry, usually landscape poetry, that is an "effluence" of himself. He directs such poetry not to men but