“AND YET GOD HAS NOT SAID A WORD”: THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AS

INVERTED AND SECULARIZED PRAYER

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama
May 10, 2008

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Steven J. Halbert is the son of Timothy and Donna Halbert, and is the husband of his loving wife Michelle. He received an Associate of Arts Degree in Bible from Columbia International University and achieved his Bachelor of Arts Degree in English from the University of South Carolina. During his undergraduate studies he worked for MCI Worldcom and Wachovia Securities, and he has put that knowledge to use by teaching Freshman Composition to the Business Learning Community at Auburn University. After his undergraduate studies, Steven worked as a Family Teacher at a group home in Clinton, SC for over a year. He has spent the last two years achieving his Master of Arts Degree in English from Auburn University.

THESIS ABSTRACT

"AND YET GOD HAS NOT SAID A WORD": THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AS INVERTED AND SECULARIZED PRAYER

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Master of Arts, May 10, 2008
(B.A., University of South Carolina, 2005)

57 Typed Pages

Directed by Christopher M. Keirstead

Nearly a decade ago, Dennis Taylor identified certain practical applications of religious criticism as a gap within the critical discourses of academia. This gap alarmed me as I read Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" along with some of its relevant criticism, because the opening stanza of this dramatic monologue mentions a "Brother Lawrence" (l. 3), but, despite the existence of a historical Brother Lawrence, no critical work has explored the potential relationship between Robert Browning and Brother Lawrence's writing and theology. The thematic link between the two works is undeniably present; thus I shall explore how Lawrence's work, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, may inform our understanding of Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ecclesiastes 12:12 says, “excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.” This thesis has been made possible, first and foremost, by the grace of God to sustain me physically, mentally, and spiritually during times of “excessive devotion to books.” He gets all of the credit for the journey so far. I would also like to thank my wonderful wife, Michelle, for her patience during late nights and early mornings. This is time she graciously gave up in order to help me accomplish this goal.

Dr. Keirstead has been invaluable as a teacher, guide, and friend during this project. He has not only encouraged the content, but helped with certain rhetorical aspects of composing a long work. Dr. Wehrs and Dr. Downes have both been helpful by pointing out additional resources and ideas that I might pursue, as well as areas that needed clarification. This project has been a wonderful learning experience.

Style manual used: MLA Style Manual, 6th Edition.

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2003.

“AND YET GOD HAS NOT SAID A WORD”: THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AS INVERTED AND SECULARIZED PRAYER

In the introduction to his seminal work, *The Disappearance of God*, J. Hillis Miller likens literary criticism to three concentric circles. The first circle, he claims, is studying one work by one author. The second circle is traversed by studying that author’s canon, and the third circle can be achieved by studying the entire era that the author was writing within and responding to (vii). This thesis primarily stays within Miller’s first two circles by examining Robert Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” in the context of Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*, and using that examination to explore possible trends within some of Browning’s other dramatic monologues. The thesis ends by speculating about how these trends respond to and participate in the conversations of religion during the Victorian period. Therefore, by providing a new reading of a classic poem, this thesis offers a possible source for Browning and develops a new template for thinking about some of Browning’s other, more canonical poetry.

Robert Browning (1812-1889) wrote “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” rather early in his career. It was first published in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842 under the title, “II – Cloister (Spanish)” and was grouped with “I – Camp (French)” under the heading “Camp and Cloister.” In 1849, these two poems became their own entities and were renamed. “II – Cloister (Spanish)” became “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister,” and “I – Camp

(French)" became "Incident of the French Camp" (Pettigrew 1079). "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" presents a speaker who is giving an invective against "Brother Lawrence" (l. 3), and the characterization of this Brother Lawrence is reminiscent of the real Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) – a French Carmelite monk who wrote about prayer in the seventeenth century.[1] Exploring the connection between Browning and rather inconspicuous religious figures is not without precedent. Most recently, Laura Rotunno pointed out that the Anselm in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" may have ties to the medieval St. Anselm. Similarly, the figure of Brother Lawrence in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" may have been fashioned with reference to an actual religious personality and author; however, since the seventeenth century Brother Lawrence might not be familiar to readers, a brief look at this monk and his work would be helpful.

The real Brother Lawrence was born Nicolas Herman. After a brief stint in the military where he was captured by German soldiers and held as a spy, "he resolved to resign himself wholly to God, and to rectify his past conduct" (Laurence 3).[2] His work, *The Practice of the Presence of God* is fairly accessible today. I personally own three copies that were published after 1998, and I also own an 1895 American edition printed by Fleming H. Revell Company. But this book has a rather piecemeal history. Brother Lawrence died in 1691 having written only a few letters and a collection of spiritual maxims. In 1699, the French Mystic, Madam Guyon, published a compilation which

[1] If the Brother Lawrence of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is indeed related to the real Brother Lawrence, it would appear that Browning was quite enamored with this character, because both Brother Lawrence (although a different spelling) and Carmelites make an appearance in "Fra Lippo Lippi" as well (l. 68, 139, and 323).

[2] As I shall discuss later, this quotation is taken from J. de Beaufort's conversations with Brother Lawrence which he records as indirect discourse.

included an abstract of Lawrence's life; a collection of his letters; conversations that he had had with J. de Beaufort; and a small work entitled, *Spiritual Maxims*. Attached to Guyon's collection is the phrase "Nouvelle Édition" (New Edition). The first English edition – which was published in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1727 and encompasses a similar smattering of selections – contains a phrase which clues us in to when the first French edition might have been published.[3] In the "Conversations," Beaufort records, "I am now to write what I have my self heard and seen of *the Manners of Brother Laurence, a bare-footed Carmelite*, who died in the Convent of Paris about two Years ago, whose Memory is blessed [*sic*]" (36). Thus, since Lawrence died in 1691, this places the first French edition at around 1693.

Today, conglomerations of these various compositions are compiled under the title *The Practice of the Presence of God*, and the most popular conglomeration seems to be a selection of various letters and conversations.[4] In 1750, John Wesley released a fifty-volume set entitled *A Christian Library Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which Have Been Publish'd in the English Tongue*.[5] This set was reduced to thirty volumes in 1821, and volume twenty-three contains five of Lawrence's letters and four of his conversations. I have elected, at least within the bounds of this thesis, to use Wesley's abridgment, because it provides the reader with a rather shorter work to think about when considering its relation

[3] The 1727 English translation contains a biography of Brother Lawrence, an explication of his manners, a record of J. de Beaufort's conversations with him, *Spiritual Maxims*, a collection of Lawrence's letters, and meditations on the Lord's Prayer.
[4] The title *The Practice of the Presence of God*, seems an apt summary of Lawrence's teaching and theology; however, for a more detailed summary of Lawrence's letters and conversation see Appendix A – Summary of Wesley's Edition of Lawrence's Writing.
[5] Although this will be explored later, the categorization of a French Catholic's writings as "practical divinity" is an important rhetorical move which helps Anglicize Lawrence.

to Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." Furthermore, the abridged work aids in focusing the discussion upon the thematic links between the primary tenets of Lawrence's life and theology, and it is likely Wesley's edition with which Browning would have been familiar.[6]

Although there is no direct evidence that Browning had access to Lawrence's writings, they were certainly available during his time. Browning's father had a very eclectic library (Irvine 2) which has not been documented, and it would be no surprise to learn that Browning had read Lawrence's work. Indeed, Browning would have been nine-years-old when the thirty-volume edition of Wesley's *A Christian Library* was published, and this coincides with the childhood which he described as "'passionately religious'" (qtd. in Orr 26). His religious passion was likely instilled into him by his mother who was a staunch "evangelical" (Everett). This term "came into general use in England at the time of the Methodist revival under Wesley and Whitefield" (Cody), so it is entirely probable that Wesley's *A Christian Library* may have been among the six-thousand volumes in Browning's father's library (Irvine 4).

The presence of Lawrence's work is even more probable when considering that Wesley's collection was classified as "practical divinity." Practical divinity could be defined as piety in action. It is distinct in its ecumenicalism from its more divisive counterparts, speculative and polemical divinity. Since practical divinity deals with

[6] On rare occasions I will draw from the more complete 1727 edition. The spelling of Lawrence's name changed over the centuries; however, the first English adaptation of the French spelling, "Laurent" to "Laurence" was maintained for many of the earlier editions, including Wesley's. Thus, when I refer to the older, 1727 edition, I shall use Lawrence's older English spelling "Laurence." When referring to Wesley's edition I shall use "Lawrence." The reasons for referring to the 1727 edition over Wesley's edition should be implicit in the text, but, if they are not, this further distinguisher should help clarify any elements of confusion. Furthermore, the copy of Wesley's text that I am working with does not have any page numbers, so I will cite the specific paragraph within the letter or conversation I am referring to at the time.

righteous living, Wesley can incorporate a markedly French Catholic monk into a publication that would have been widely read by English Protestants. Practical divinity allowed Wesley to Anglicize Brother Lawrence, and, therefore, demonstrate the universality of Lawrence's methods. This sort of moral literature would have appealed to Browning's father, who, although not overtly religious, "was just the kind of man to be converted through sheer good nature and tractability" (Irvine 4). Regardless of whether or not Browning had access to the historical Lawrence's work, the two works are thematically linked, and the historical Lawrence is able to inform our reading of Browning's Lawrence which provides a new framework for considering "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

Wesley's abridgement of the English edition of Lawrence's writings contains a selection of five letters. Each of these letters reveals theological ideas which the speaker of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" inverts through his dramatic monologue. The term "inversion" is useful because it implies a complete reversal that other terminology lacks, and, once these five inversions are realized, Browning's use of them can operate as a template for considering some of his other canonical monologues. Furthermore, Wesley's abridgement contains four conversations which aid in our understanding of the inversion that the poem actuates upon the five letters.

The first of these letters discloses the inversion of audience that is implicit within "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." In the first letter, which is addressed to "the Reverend Mother N." (Laurence 90), Brother Lawrence is introduced to his reader.[7] He

[7] Amusingly, this is shortened in Wesley's edition to "THE REV." (Lawrence Letter 1).

chronicles his entering of the monastery, and what his intentions were.[8] He declares that he desired to give himself entirely up to God and renounce all else (Letter 1, par. 2). To accomplish his renunciation, Lawrence describes himself as directing his thoughts continually upon ideas "of death, of judgment, hell, heaven, and [his] sins" (Letter 1, par. 3).[9] However, Lawrence, after "some years" (Letter 1, par. 3) moved beyond the relatively cliché meditations on the vanity of life, and, instead, "found [him]self changed all at once; and [his] soul, which, until that time, was in trouble, felt a profound inward peace, as if she were in her centre and place of rest" (Letter 1 par. 5).[10] And it is with this peace that Lawrence seems to irritate Robert Browning's speaker.

Browning's speaker – a fellow monk – in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is quite frustrated with Brother Lawrence. His hatred is obvious from the first four lines of the poem:

> Gr-r-r-there go, my heart's abhorrence!
>
> Water your damned flower-pots, do!
>
> If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
>
> God's blood, would not mine kill you!" (l. 1-4).

However, the reason for his hatred is unclear. The only picture that the reader is given of Browning's Lawrence is the picture that the speaker of "Soliloquy" provides, but this picture is out of focus. By looking to the historical Lawrence, the picture is brought into focus, and the reason behind the speaker's hatred becomes clearer. Browning's speaker

[8] On a recent endeavor to Paris, I was able to locate the actual location of the historical Lawrence's monastery. For a brief discussion and pictures, see Appendix B – A Pictorial Tour of Lawrence's Church and Monastery.

[9] These sorts of meditations have quite a long history which centers on remembering the individuals' mortality (memento mori), and denying the world (contemptus mundi). For a rather famous example closer to Lawrence's time, consider Philippe de Mornay's "A Discourse on Life and Death" (1579).

[10] Lawrence later indicates that he "suffered" for "ten years" (Letter 1 par. 4) in this state of meditation.

is frustrated by what the historical Lawrence would call a “profound inward peace” (Lawrence Letter 1 par. 4) that the Lawrence of the poem experiences. Browning’s Lawrence never seems troubled, and this troubles the speaker. The speaker illustrates Lawrence’s lack of concern over the polemical practices in which he [the speaker] participates:

> When he finishes refection,
> Knife and fork he never lays
> Cross-wise, to my recollection,
> As I do, in Jesu's praise.
> I the Trinity illustrate,
> Drinking watered orange-pulp —
> In three sips the Arian frustrate
> While he drains his at one gulp (l. 33-40).

Browning’s Lawrence seems more interested in relishing the meal which the speaker carefully makes into a theological quagmire. The picture that Browning’s speaker paints of Lawrence is one of a simplistic, dutiful monk who enjoys puttering in the garden (l. 5-8), speaking about his duties (l. 9-14), and preparing (l. 41-46) and savoring (l. 33-40) meals. Similarly, the historical Lawrence was the order’s cook (Conversation 2, par. 7); and, because he strove to do everything out of love for God (Conversation 2, par. 7), he was able to enjoy any duty, for it served as a means by which he might communicate with God (Conversation 4, par. 13). The historical Lawrence furnishes the information necessary for understanding the frustration that Browning’s speaker is feeling towards the Lawrence of the poem, and this new picture provides a sharp contrast between these two

individuals which is reminiscent of the juxtaposition between spirit and law epitomized in Jesus and the Pharisees.

Browning's speaker is troubled in much the same way that the Pharisees of the Bible were troubled by Jesus. The speaker of "Soliloquy," in this situation, plays the Pharisee to Lawrence's Jesus.

Jesus identifies the conundrum that the Pharisees were experiencing:

> [25]"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.
>
> [26]"You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.
>
> [27]"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.
>
> [28]"So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:25-28)

The final line is key. The speaker of "Soliloquy" is seemingly doing everything right outwardly (l. 33-40), but inwardly he is full of hate and malice (l. 3) because he is attempting to please "men."[11] The pharisaical image of the speaker is juxtaposed with the image of Lawrence in the poem, but, once again, turning to the historical Lawrence

[11] Not too long ago, Scott Gwara and John Nelson released an article concerning homosocial and taxonomical referents within "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister;" however, that is beyond the purview of this essay. The translators of the NASB have maintained the inclusivity of the Greek *anthropoi* in this instance. Thus, this translation of the word "man," and the use of the word "man" within the essay should be viewed inclusively rather than exclusively.

provides a slightly sharper image. The historical Lawrence indicates that individuals ought to do their jobs – indeed, everything – unto God and not unto "men" (Conversation 4, par. 2). Therefore, the audience from which both of these monks seek approval is quite different. Lawrence seeks God's approval, whereas the speaker of "Soliloquy" seeks the approval of "men." However, the speaker in Browning's poem takes this inversion of Lawrence's audience one step further. The speaker actually projects his hypocrisy onto Lawrence.

In the fourth stanza, he accuses Lawrence of looking lustfully at women, but ends the accusation with the line: "(That is, if he'd let it show!)" (l. 32). This line is in parentheses because the speaker of the monologue is unable to prove Lawrence's lustful look. On the other hand, he is able to describe explicitly "brown Dolores" and "Sanchicha" (l. 26 and 28), and his descriptions suggest that he is very familiar with watching them. When he adds the last line to his accusation, the reader understands that he does not have any evidence but is, instead, projecting his vices upon the virtuous Lawrence. By recording his voyeurism in speech form, the speaker is imagining an audience that is sympathetic with his voyeuristic vice. Therefore, the internal audience – the one to whom the speaker imagines he is speaking – is someone very much like himself, for only someone like himself would sympathize with his plight and invective. Not only, then, does this speaker imply an audience of "men," but he implicitly addresses an audience of "men" *who are like him*.

The historical Lawrence provides clarity in response to the speaker's accusation of hypocrisy by revealing how he achieves his inner peace:

> I have quitted all forms of devotion and set prayers, but those to which my state obliges me. And I make it my business to persevere in his holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general loving regard to God, which I may call an actual presence of GOD . . . In short, I am assured beyond all doubt, that my soul has been with GOD above these thirty years. (Letter 1, par. 7)

Lawrence expresses that he has "quitted" all "forms of devotion and set prayers" (Letter 1, par. 7). The very thing which Browning's speaker embraces, the "form," Lawrence has "quitted" (Letter 1, par. 7). This quitting is demonstrative of a move from the formalism and legalism of Browning's speaker to the "inward peace" (Letter 1, par. 4) which comes with experiencing God outside "forms of devotion and set prayers" (Letter 1, par. 7). The reason that Lawrence has quitted these *forms* of devotion and set prayer is to accomplish their *purpose* by other means. The purpose of devotions and prayers, as the historical Lawrence understands them, is to draw the individual closer to God; thus Lawrence quits these for the same reason – so that he can draw closer to God. He replaces the forms with "simple attention, and a general loving regard to God" (Letter 1, par. 7), and, by so doing, Lawrence accomplishes continual conversation (Letter 1, par. 10) with God. Therefore, the historical Lawrence and the Lawrence of the poem focus upon God; whereas the speaker of "Soliloquy" is focused upon outward appearances of piety. Thus the speaker has effectively inverted his audience from God to men, but, because he projects his own hypocrisy onto others, the inversion is not just from God to men but from God to men like himself. This inversion of audience necessitates an

inversion of power which is implicit when comparing Letter Two with "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."

Despite all of his scheming, the speaker in "Soliloquy" will never be successful in his efforts to cause Brother Lawrence to suffer, because Lawrence seems unreachable. The speaker provides a mock conversation which illustrates this:

> How go on your flowers? None double?
>
> Not one fruit-sort can you spy?
>
> Strange! And I, too, at such trouble,
>
> Keep them close-nipped on the sly! (l. 45-48).

The text implies that Brother Lawrence finds the lack of produce "Strange!" (l. 47), but nowhere does the speaker indicate that Lawrence is upset by this development. This unreachable quality of Lawrence merely stokes the speaker's anger, and his inability to cause the Lawrence of the monologue to stumble is, once again, given a source in the historical Lawrence. Letter Two reveals that suffering only serves to drive the historical Lawrence closer to God (Letter 2, pars. 1, 4, and 5) and, consequently, to experience the inward peace that Browning's speaker finds so detestable. Because of its one-sided nature, the poem can merely imply this. If the speaker were to be successful in his attempts to trip-up (l. 50) Brother Lawrence, it is likely that he would proclaim his success to the implicit addressee; however, it can be assumed that the speaker is never successful, because, every scheme he tries only escalates to another scheme until the Faustian speaker appeals to Satan for help.

As has been demonstrated, the speaker's lack of success in causing Lawrence to stumble finds its source in the historical Lawrence's closeness to God. In his second

letter, Lawrence reveals that individuals should "accustom" themselves to "suffering" (Letter 2, par. 1). His attitude towards adversity is that it is a gift from God. God is everything for Lawrence. Indeed, even if the speaker of "Soliloquy" should succeed in causing Lawrence some form of pain, he would ultimately fail, for Lawrence preaches, "Pains and sufferings would be a paradise to me, while I should suffer *with* my God: and the greatest pleasures would be hell to me, if I could relish them *without* him; all my consolation would be to suffer something for his sake" (Letter 2, par. 4 emphasis mine). Even in suffering, the historical Lawrence maintains and encourages communication with God; thus his faith is strengthened through suffering, but suffering for the speaker of "Soliloquy" leaves him wallowing in impotence.

The speaker's failure to cause Lawrence to stumble reveals the second inversion, that of power. This inversion of power is directly linked to the inversion of audience that was apparent after comparing the "Soliloquy" to Letter One of Wesley's abridgement. The implicit addressee of a prayer is God, whereas the implicit addressee of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" is "men" like himself. Lawrence is therefore empowered through his suffering, but, this empowerment leaves the speaker in "Soliloquy" impotent. The speaker is drawn away from God by the trial which Brother Lawrence represents, and he turns, instead, to "men" like himself and, ultimately, sin and Satan to seek revenge and comfort for his affliction ("Soliloquy" l. 49-70).

The historical Lawrence, on the other hand, would advocate that the speaker go through his suffering with God, but this would negate itself. Lawrence regards any sort of suffering done to him as a vehicle for drawing him closer to God. The angry speaker, even if his requests were granted, would merely have cause to be angrier, because the

suffering Lawrence would undergo from the speaker's request would only bolster that "inward peace" (Letter 1, par. 4) which Lawrence possesses. Therefore, the very nature of the speaker's requests leaves no room for help. Help, however, is the typical response to a request, and it is the inversion of request which the next letter demonstrates.

By the end of Letter Three, a recognizable pattern at the conclusion of Brother Lawrence's letters becomes apparent. He closes Letter Three with the question: "Do you pray for me, as I for you" (par. 4). This question is turned upside-down by the speaker of "Soliloquy," and calls for a consideration of the very nature of speech. When reading this dramatic monologue, it is easy to imagine the speaker as a timid, chubby little monk shuffling around the convent talking to himself about all of the evil plans he is making to cause Brother Lawrence to stumble. Indeed, the monk's sarcasm is apparent throughout, but is perhaps best illustrated when he repeats Lawrence's dinner-table question, "What's the Latin name for 'parsley'?" (l. 15). This seems an innocent enough question from Brother Lawrence, perhaps too innocent, because the speaker's rather snide reply is, "What's the Greek name for Swine's Snout?" (l. 16). The historical Lawrence is a rather inquisitive fellow as well, but he uses questions to convey care. It is not just the questions, but the very act of speech itself which opens the ethical horizon of fraternity within community. Speech is a humanizing medium and the historical Lawrence uses questions – which, unless rhetorical, aid in building fraternity because they admit a lack, and the one being questioned can help supply that lack – to convey care and develop fraternity. Similarly Browning's Lawrence asks seemingly innocent questions in an effort to develop fraternity. It is their speech generally but their questions particularly which humanize them. Browning's speaker, on the other hand, although he is humanized

by his speech, the content of that speech bestializes him. It is cold, distant, and sarcastic. He even begins and ends his monologue with a guttural noise rather than actual words.

The speaker inverts the fraternity which speech (particularly questions or requests) conveys into a hatred which exemplifies his disdain for Lawrence. The question that the historical Lawrence asks at the end of Letter Three, "Do you pray for me" is answerable in the affirmative by Browning's speaker if one considers that he has turned to his implicit addressee as the recipient for this sort-of prayer; however, the second part of the question, "as I for you," is certainly not the case with this speaker. The speaker is praying for unjust things to happen to a seemingly just monk. In fact, if Browning's Brother Lawrence is indeed a characterization of the historical Brother Lawrence then this is a complete inversion. The historical Brother Lawrence was considered both just and good; thus the speaker requests for evil to befall good.[12] The historical Lawrence, on the other hand, continually prays for good to befall good or for good to befall evil. It is a complete inversion, then, for Browning's speaker to pray for evil to befall good, but that is exactly what this speaker is doing. So, to answer Lawrence's question, the speaker *is* praying for him, but the speaker's requests are the very inverse of his own. This issue becomes far more complex, however, by considering disdain as a topic for prayer.

One of the primary conceptions of prayer is that it is a language which goes beyond the human. It seeks a higher source for answers to problems and requests, and attributes praise to a source higher than the prayer-giver. Therefore, since the speaker has

[12] Beaufort relays, "I thought it would be very usefull to let the World see in his Person an excellent Model of a solid Piety, in a Time especially when almost all Mankind place Vertue where it is not, and take very false Ways to come at it [*sic*]" (Laurence 37)

inverted the audience from a source higher than himself to an implicit addressee that is (quite literally) his equal, it might seem as though his requests would be inverted as well. Indeed, the invective of the speaker does not really seem an appropriate topic for a "Biblical" prayer. But this is not true. Many of the Psalms are imprecatory. They contain requests for curses (see, for instance Psalm 69 and 109 – typically considered the most vehement of the imprecatory Psalms), so it is not an imprecatory request which is the problem. It is the request's outworking. Phillip Yancey, one of the editors of *The Student Bible*, attempts to explain what to make of these rather sinister requests. I quote his recent book about prayer at length, because each paragraph of Yancey's explanation reveals something imperative about the inversion of request that is taking place within the monologue:

> As Dorothy Sayers once remarked, we all have diabolical thoughts, but there's a world of difference in how we act on those thoughts, whether, say we write a murder mystery or commit murder. If a person wrongs me unjustly, I have several options. I can seek personal revenge, a response condemned by the Bible. I can deny or suppress my feelings of hurt and anger. Or, I can take those feelings to God, entrusting God with the task of retributive justice. The cursing psalms are vivid examples of that last option. The authors are expressing their outrage to God, not to the enemy.
>
> Instinctively, we want to clean up our feelings in our prayers, but perhaps we have it all backwards. Perhaps we should strive to take all our worst feelings to God. After all, what would be gossip when addressed to anyone else is petition when addressed to God. What is a vengeful curse

> when spoken about someone ("Damn those people!") is a plea of helpless dependence when spoken directly to God ("It's up to you to damn those people—only you are a just judge").
>
> I see the cursing psalms as an important model for how to deal with evil and injustice. I should not try to suppress my reaction of horror and outrage at evil. Nor should I try to take justice in my own hands. Rather, I should deliver those feelings, stripped bare, to God. As the books of Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk clearly show, God has a high threshold of tolerance for what is appropriate to say in a prayer. God can "handle" my unsuppressed rage. I may well find that my vindictive feelings need God's correction—but only by taking those feelings to God will I have that opportunity for correction and healing. (173)

The inversion which "Soliloquy" actuates upon prayers of an imprecatory nature, then, is twofold. First, and perhaps most obviously, the speaker is not "deal[ing] with evil and injustice" (Yancey 173). Instead, he is reviling the goodness and righteousness of his fellow monk. His prayer is not for evil to befall evil, but, rather, for evil to befall good – a complete inversion. Secondly, and perhaps less obvious, this speaker internalizes a prayer that should have been directed towards God. Furthermore, because the speaker's internalization manifests itself through a dramatic monologue which is implicitly addressed to an audience of "men" (and "men" like himself as the first inversion illustrates), the speaker in "Soliloquy" comes closer to what Yancey calls "gossip" and "vengeful curses" (Yancey 173). However, had the speaker's imprecation been directed appropriately, it would have been a "petition" and "a plea of helpless dependence" upon

God, and, although the "vindictive feelings [may have] need[ed] God's correction," taking them to Him would have given the speaker an opportunity for "correction and healing" (Yancey 173). This is an inversion because the form of the speaker's invective – monological discourse – humanizes the invective, but the content of the invective bestializes not only the speaker but his implicit addressee as well. Thus, by considering the closing pattern that is evident in Lawrence's third letter, the inversion of audience is reiterated and the inversion of the request is revealed.

The internalization of what should have been vocalized which leads to the inversion of request, and the suffering which is behind the inversion of power, provides the foundation for the fourth inversion. In Letter Four, the historical Lawrence says, "However great the sufferings may be, receive them with love" (Letter 4, par. 1). The "Soliloquy" has inverted this idea by providing a speaker who has flipped the two keywords "suffering" and "love." His suffering is over another's goodness. It is a suffering that need not be so, and, ultimately, it is a suffering which can never be eradicated. If Lawrence views sufferings – internal or external – as a means to grow closer to God, and it is this closeness that drives the speaker in the "Soliloquy" to wish for evil to befall the Lawrence of the poem, then he is locked into a perpetual cycle of impotence. Lawrence is unreachable in ways that make the speaker feel small; therefore, the speaker is not responding to his suffering "with love" (Letter 4, par 1), but with hate. He despises Lawrence, and his suffering will, therefore, never end.

Finally, in Letter Five, Lawrence extends the ideas of Letters Two and Four to their logical outcome. He claims that sufferings actually come from "our loving father," and when individuals realize that God is the author of their sufferings, "sufferings will

lose their bitterness, and become even matter of consolation" (Letter 5, par. 1). The idea that God is responsible for certain perceived evils alludes to a particular brand of theology that is perhaps best summed up in Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes *all* things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (emphasis mine). Therefore, as this verse illustrates, what may seem like suffering is actually for the good of those who love God. Browning's speaker, on the other hand, does not view suffering as a means of spiritual growth, or even as deriving from God. Rather, he views suffering as a direct result of other people's desire to cause him grief. The adage, "What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger," seems apt in this situation. The sufferings of the speaker will only serve to make him a stronger individual. Therefore, where Lawrence's suffering aids in developing him (Lawrence) spiritually, the suffering of Browning's speaker hardens him mentally and physically while callusing him spiritually. The strengthening of the mental and physical in opposition to the spiritual is a rather worldly development, thus the reader of "Soliloquy" is left with a speaker who is gaining worldly wisdom. His development might even be referred to as secular. Furthermore, instead of delighting in his suffering, as the historical Lawrence would advocate, the speaker punishes himself, because, ultimately, his sufferings are self-induced. The final inversion, the inversion of purpose, relegates the speaker to his own private place of punishment . . . to his own private Hell.

All of these inversions – the inversion of audience, the inversion of power, the inversion of request, the inversion of suffering, and the inversion of purpose – are communicated to the reader of "Soliloquy" through the lens of the historical Brother Lawrence. Letter One illustrates how the "Soliloquy" redirects the audience of a prayer

from God to the implicit addressee. Letter Two illumines the inversion of power that takes place within the "Soliloquy" as the speaker unsuccessfully attempts to cause Brother Lawrence to suffer. The historical Lawrence's closing pattern, which is apparent by the end of Letter Three, clarifies the difference between just and unjust prayers, and reveals the inversion of request implicit within "Soliloquy." Letter Four indicates that suffering is meant to draw individuals into closer fellowship with God until it "become[s] full of consolation" (Letter 4, par. 1); thus the fourth inversion – the inversion of suffering – is revealed. Finally, by linking suffering with God, Letter Five effectively identifies as misplaced matters such as the speaker's blame of Lawrence for all he resents and envies. The historical Lawrence would view the speaker's sufferings as deriving from God, for the purpose of drawing the speaker closer to God. Since the speaker appeals to Satan instead, the inversion of purpose concludes the five inversions.

Interestingly, this framework seems to resonate with other canonical Browning monologues, and the conclusion to Lawrence's first letter reveals something that may help clarify our thinking about these monologues as inverted prayers. Lawrence states, "As for my set hours of prayer, they are only a continuation of the same exercise" (Letter 1, par. 10). In other words, Lawrence understands himself to be in continual communication with God, and calls to prayer are merely an extension of that conversation. The text of "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" subtly inverts this principle by having Browning's speaker reply to a call to prayer: "'St, there's Vespers! Plena gratia / Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r — you swine!'" ("Soliloquy" l. 71, 72). The speaker is turned away from the rant he has been developing for the entirety of the poem by a call to Vespers. His *inverted* prayer is interrupted by a call to an *actual* prayer. Thus what he has been

doing for the totality of the monologue is contrasted with what he is called to do. Real prayer interrupts the secular prayer that the speaker has been practicing. He attempts the real prayer, but he is unable to finish it. Reading lines seventy-one and seventy-two aloud demonstrate this inability. The "Virgo," flows quite nicely into the "Gr-r-r" (l. 72). One can imagine the speaker kneeling as he attempts to pray, but, by the second line, his emotions so overwhelm his prayer that he hurls whatever is near as he shouts out his final imprecation against Brother Lawrence: "'. . . Plena gratia / Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r — you swine!'" ("Soliloquy" l. 71, 72). The inversion, however, goes deeper than the mere inability to finish a prayer. Typically a Hail Mary begins, "Áve María, grátia pléna," but the speaker has not only switched the two phrases, but also the words within the phrase. He says, "plena gratia" instead of "grátia pléna," and his use of "Virgo" (l. 72) instead of "Maria" seems flippant.[13] Thus the call to prayer which concludes the poem ends with the very idea of inverted prayer, and invites us to carry this template to other similar monologues in the genre. Perhaps by taking our cue from the inversion of prayer discovered in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," a new critical idiom might emerge that would view inverted prayer as a possibility of the genre which Browning exploits through other dramatic monologues with religious themes and/or particularly deranged speakers; or, perhaps it is *because* the dramatic monologue is reminiscent of an inverted prayer that it fits nicely with religious themes and/or deranged speakers. But what precisely is a dramatic monologue?

[13] Once again, for a more detailed analysis of some of the sexual referents in this poem see Scott Gwara and John Nelson's article, "Botanical Taxonomy and Buggery in Browning's 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister.'"

Adena Rosmarin chronicles the various definitions that have been applied to the dramatic monologue from such notable scholars as Ina Sessions, Park Honan, Robert Langbaum, Ralph Rader, Wayne Booth, and Stanley Fish (53-56), and adds her own definition to this critical history. She argues that dramatic monologues are "poems that invite their readers to distinguish the poem's meaning from that of its characterized speaker" (56). She posits that her definition provides an "interpretive history" (56), and suggests that poems that do not fit into her model should be categorized as something other than a dramatic monologue (56). Rosmarin's statement, however, illustrates that attempting to pin the dramatic monologue to any one definition has proven problematic for decades. That is why the purpose of this thesis is simply to provide an interpretive tool that works with some of Browning's best known poems. To that end, I would like to posit how each of the inversions which "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" reveals are expanded when considering the characteristics of other Browning monologues.

The first inversion, the inversion of audience, must be apparent even in poems where there are other figures present. In "Soliloquy," the audience is not made aware of any particular person to whom Browning's monologist is speaking; however, in works where there are other, silent characters present, the inversion of the audience might be more problematic because there are now two implicit addressees. E. Warwick Slinn does an excellent job of summarizing this problem in his chapter for the 2002 *Blackwell Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Slinn traces the development of thinking about the internal audience as auditors, to the current formulation of thinking about the internal audience as interlocutor. The ideas surrounding the internal and external audiences of the dramatic monologue have inspired articles such as Ashton Nichols' "Dialogism in the

Dramatic Monologue: Suppressed Voices in Browning" (81-83). However, throughout his article Slinn consistently refers to the external audience of the dramatic monologue (i.e. you and I) as "the reader," so I take my cue from him.

The reader of the dramatic monologue and the implicit addressee (i.e. the interlocutor) of the dramatic monologue must be kept distinct when comparing the form of the dramatic monologue and the form of the written prayer. Although the initial conception of the prayer is that it is an oral tradition, it is only when prayers are written that they can be adequately compared with dramatic monologues.[14] The dramatic monologue is similar to the written prayer in that it creates the illusion of a speaker. However, this is also one way in which the form of the dramatic monologue inverts the form of prayer. The dramatic monologue is written by an author for the purpose of creating this illusion. The form of prayer, on the other hand, creates this illusion because it is crafted either from a prayer that *has been* spoken or for the purpose of *being* spoken. Initial comparisons build upon the foundation of this understanding. First of all, both of these forms can be performed silently or aloud. Written prayers – particularly when considering the written prayers of or for monks – are often instructive (i.e. teaching one *how* or *what* to pray), educational (i.e. illuminating the spiritual concerns of Biblical characters), or spiritually enriching (i.e. allowing certain truths to be gleaned about God, humanity or the self through studying them). Similarly, dramatic monologues – within plays or poetry – are generally considered to be an open window into the character's

[14] Written prayers are by no means an anomaly. Yancey records that, "The Bible includes around 650 prayers, some short and some long, reflecting many different circumstances and moods. Taken together, they provide an excellent guide for anyone seeking to learn to pray" (117). Beyond this there are publications of prayer books, including the most famous *Book of Common Prayer*, which has a long and wonderful history and was certainly in use during Browning's time.

hidden thoughts, feelings, or actions. The literary scholar can glean roughly the same thing from dramatic monologues that the clergy can glean from printed prayers. They can be instructive (i.e. teaching one *how* or *what* to write), educational (i.e. illuminating the hidden concerns of the characters involved), or educationally – perhaps even spiritually – enriching (i.e. illuminating what scholars might call social or societal constructs). Thus the two forms, in presentation and purpose, seem to align nicely; however when considering the content and form of certain dramatic monologues with that of written prayers, the reader witnesses the subversive inversion that the dramatic monologue enacts upon the form of prayer.

The observations so far have been based upon only one recipient – the reader. The reader is where the dramatic monologue stops. For the most part, dramatic monologues are written for the specific edification of the reader, even when the reader (or the character giving the monologue) is not aware of it.[15] Prayer, on the other hand, does not privilege the reader. It privileges the Creator of the reader. The primary recipient of a prayer is God, and God is beyond both the reader and the initiator of the prayer. Indeed, since this God claims to have inspired the words of His own book (2 Timothy 3:16), He is the ultimate author of the prayers recorded within it. This, of course, delves into the realm of theology, so, for the sake of argument, some kind of agency for the original speaker/writer of the prayer must be assumed. The pray-er's recipient, then, goes beyond his or her reader, and encourages his or her reader to do the same. Thus, the

[15] This consciousness of the reader is something that different poets do differently. Most of Browning's speakers do not seem to be aware of the presence of a reader. Wordsworth's speakers, on the other hand, are aware that they are being listened to ("Tintern Abbey" 111-150), and use that to their advantage.

reader is not the be-all-and-end-all of the written monologue of prayer. The reader, in this instance, is not privileged.

Since the dramatic monologue is written by the author for the reader, the internal audience must be considered. One might easily contend that the reader is not always the privileged recipient of the dramatic monologue, and, as has been demonstrated, the dramatic monologue can have an implicit addressee who is quite different from the reader. This internal audience, or interlocutor, could be the self, the projected or virtual other, and/or a silent, second party. The reader is often given the privileged spot of listening as the speaker directs his or her monologue to one of these entities. W. David Shaw has called these monologists "unconscious self-deceivers" (167), and their self-deception is a key difference between the dramatic monologue and the written prayer. [16] Because the clergy in poems like "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" are corrupt by the standards of the order which they have vowed to follow, they need to confess to someone. They deceive themselves into thinking that their actions are just, and are, therefore, not seeking absolution from the interlocutor. Rather, their interlocutors validate their self-deception and serve as the final authority to whom they appeal. Thus the dramatic monologue is using the subtle nuance of recipient to invert the Christian tradition of prayer by turning its interlocutors into gods.

[16] Although Shaw's book has a title which suggests a similar focus and fills a critical gap, he is more interested in exploring the poets' role within the dramatic monologue. He suggests that, because of the author's position as "*agnostos theo* . . . unknown God," the dramatic monologue participates within the "dangerous legacy of agnostic theology" (3); whereas my argument focuses not upon the poet, but the recipient and the very *form* itself as participating in this legacy.

The inversion of audience – witnessed when the speaker applies to the interlocutor in order to gain control of a situation – brings about the second inversion, the inversion of power. The pray-er ultimately leaves power and, consequently, the successful wielding of that power in the hands of God, but the speakers of dramatic monologues use their monologue in order to attempt to construct power for themselves.[17] Ashton Nichols points out this paradox as he discusses the dialogism inherent to many of Browning's dramatic monologues. His discussion centers on Browning's monologues that have particularly deranged or pathological speakers. He says that "all of these speakers are actually individuals who have lost power" (31), and he further claims that "monological discourse [is] a means to such power" (31). Nichols uses several dramatic monologues to illustrate his point, but, ultimately, demonstrates that the reasoning behind the monologue is that the speakers are "striving to gain power over an individual or situation" (31). This is vastly different from Lawrence's idea of consigning everything to God. The requests in monologues are in the best interests of the speaker; whereas, Brother Lawrence wants only to "give himself entirely up to God" (Letter 1, par. 2).[18] Instead of resigning the self to God, however, the speakers of dramatic monologues use "monological discourse" as a "verbal strategy that seeks to establish definitive meaning" (Nichols 30). The establishment of definitive meaning is a direct inversion of the trust implicit when resigning oneself to God. Therefore, the deranged speakers in Browning

[17] As shall be discussed later, prayers that do not operate by leaving power and the successful wielding of that power in the hands of God are ultimately flawed. Understandably, religion, and even prayer, has been used to gain power; however, it is the *intention* of both mediums which is being considered, not the *abuses* of which the mediums are capable.

[18] Remember that Lawrence's letters and conversations were included in Wesley's compilation of "practical divinity." These considerations of prayer and theology are therefore linked with specific theological, devotional traditions. As has already been considered, the Anglicizing of these ideas aids in an ecumenical conception of them.

are attempting to seize power *from* God instead of resigning it *to* God, but Letter Three illustrates why this will not work.

The third letter identifies Brother Lawrence seeking prayer from others in the same manner that he prays for others. The speaker of "Soliloquy," however, inverts a valid and just request into an invalid and unjust request, as he asks for evil to befall good. This inversion initially seems the most difficult to prove on a larger scale; however, by considering that there is a perversion of values that must take place before such an inversion of request can be actualized, the inversion of request is not as distant as some might think. Consider, for instance, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church."

In "Bishop," the prayer language is inverted in a slightly different manner. The title of this poem suggests that Browning is playing with the word "order." The Bishop is making the final arrangements for his death and burial; he is "ordering" his tomb. He is making requests that shall be fulfilled later; he is placing an "order" for his tomb. He is demanding his "nephews--sons" (l. 3) to make these arrangements; he is "ordering" them to arrange his tomb. Lastly, this bishop is part of a hierarchical system; he participates in an "order." And, interestingly, a prayer does much the same thing as an order. It makes a request that will be fulfilled later. This is where the inversion begins.

In prayer, the individual's requests to God must be on God's agenda. There are many affirmative answers to prayer recorded in the Biblical text, but experience shows that God does not always answer a request in the affirmative. Jesus tells his disciples to pray, "*Your* kingdom come / *Your* will be done, / On earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 emphasis mine). Thus it is not that individuals order God to do *their* will as if He

were a magical genie, but that individuals order *God's* will to be done in their lives. The Bishop inverts this from the start by ordering *his* will for his death. However, his will is about to die. That is why Nichols comments that "The speaker of the poem seeks, or assumes, a power over the auditor [the interlocutor] of the poem. But the auditor has a power denied to the speaker, often represented as power over the speaker" (31). If, as I have argued, the interlocutor serves as a god figure, there is no reason for his "sons--nephews" (l. 3) to honor his requests, because he has inverted the request by seeking good for himself rather than good for his god.[19] In fact, because of the inversion of power, the interlocutor is ultimately at a loss as to how to treat the bishop, and it is not at all likely that the bishop's orders will actually be carried out.[20]

The inversion of request is furthered in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" because of the presence of the bishop's "nephews--sons" (l. 3). A physical interlocutor was lacking in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," but the interlocutors in "Bishop" are his children, specifically Anselm (l. 2, 28, 64).[21] The allusion to the Biblical passage of Ecclesiastes One in the first line of the poem ("Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!") furthers the connection between fathers and sons. The father/son model is nothing new to Biblical texts, specifically the wisdom books of

[19] One might easily argue that he is indeed seeking good for his sons since he is willing them many things; but the advice and objects that he bequeaths to them are all earthly and temporal ("fair" women, prestigious locations and conditions for burial, "*lapis lazuli*," "villas," "horses," "brown Greek manuscripts," and "mistresses") (4-5, 125, 20-30, 53-62, 68-72, 42, 45-46, 74-75), as opposed to heavenly and everlasting.
[20] This conclusion is also reached by Nichols. He notes, "The bishop seems to know that his sons will disregard his wishes" (31), but Nichols attributes this disregard to the loss of power that is experienced by each monologist. He does not, however, indicate *why* each of these monologists has lost the power in the first place. I am suggesting that this loss of power is revealed by considering the dramatic monologue as a form of inverted prayer.
[21] For further discussion of Anselm's role in this poem, see Laura Rotunno's "'This Alone Would Drive Me to Despair': the Position of Anselm in Robert Browning's 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church'."

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but what is unique about the poem is its reversal of the wisdom found in these books. The link to prayer, here, is allusive until considering some of Jesus' statements on the subject. Jesus says that our attitude towards God should be like our attitude towards a kind and loving father (Luke 11:11-13), and, in his prayer just prior to the crucifixion, Jesus refers to God with an intimate term that would be much like our "papa" or "daddy" (Mark 14:35-37). The paternalism of God found within much of Biblical literature is one of the reasons behind the controversy surrounding women's roles in the church – particularly churches that still hold to hierarchical systems of, "popes, cardinals, and priests" ("Bishop" l. 94). Therefore, this bishop – who is supposed to be Christ's conduit on earth for the prayers of His spiritual children – is thrice inverting the prayer model found in the Bible. First, he is giving advice to his true children (one reason for celibacy among the clerical orders is so that they can look out for spiritual children without the worries of physical children). Secondly, the advice and objects that he bequeaths to his children are all earthly and temporal, as opposed to heavenly and everlasting. Thirdly, the motivation behind his advice is for the purpose of besting "Old Gandolf," (5, 17, 31, 50, 67, 78, 124) which is, as has been demonstrated, an action "condemned by the Bible" (Yancey 173). Thus, this dramatic monologue falls prey to the same inversion of imprecatory prayers that "Soliloquy" does, and, because the content of this instance of the dramatic monologue inverts the audience and power of the prayer, the request is also inverted. Such a consideration works with other, non-religious monologues as well. The reader does not have to think very hard to recognize the perversion of values which leads to the inversion of request in monologues such as "My Last Duchess" or "Porphyria's Lover." Despite their non-religious nature, these

monologues contain pathological speakers, and illustrate that such inversions can be applied to many of Browning's poems that have religious themes *or* deranged speakers. If a dramatic monologue possesses the characteristics of the first three inversions, the final two are easily identifiable.

The fourth inversion – the inversion of suffering – was revealed by comparing Lawrence's attitude towards suffering to the attitude of the speaker in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister." Letter Four identifies that Lawrence views suffering as a means to draw him closer to God. Suffering, therefore, whether internal or external, is a good thing for Lawrence. In the dramatic monologues which involve Browning's deranged speakers, however, suffering – whether internal or external, realized or unrealized – is perceived as negative. I have already referred to Nichols' argument in this situation; so, if the monologist is truly attempting to "gain power" (Nichols 31), then he or she feels that power has been lost in some way. The very reason for speaking in monologue, then, is to regain something lost instead of reveling in that loss. Ultimately, through the emotions revealed in the monologue, the speaker achieves a pseudo-intimacy with the interlocutor. The intimacy is false, because the speaker is attempting to *gain* control of the situation, not *resign* control as the historical Lawrence would advocate. The fourth inversion – the inversion of suffering – is at the root of the feeling of powerlessness and confusion that the speaker experiences through the second inversion – the inversion of power.

The inversion of suffering is also at the root of the third inversion – the inversion of request. Part of the reason that the request is inverted is because it is rooted in the self and the sufferings of the self. It is a request from the self for the self, as opposed to being

a request rooted in God to accomplish the purposes of God. Browning may be using the inversion of prayer in some of his monologues to highlight the monologist's attempt to gain control over some form of suffering, so suffering is the cause – not the conduit – for the monologist to deliver his or her monologue. In other words, Lawrence *uses* suffering. The monologist *panics over* suffering. Lawrence rejoices and sees the good in suffering, thus negating it as suffering. The monologist despises the suffering, and compounds the problem by developing a pseudo-intimate connection with the interlocutor. The pseudo-intimate connection is but a reflection of the real connection with God which Lawrence uses to develop "inward peace" (Letter 1, par. 4), but, if suffering is a conduit for drawing an individual closer to God, then, as Lawrence suggests, God is actually the author of that suffering.

The fifth and final letter that is recorded in Wesley's *A Christian Library* builds upon the ideas from the previous letters. Letter Two indicated that suffering is a reason to walk with God; Letter Four indicated that, because suffering provides a reason to walk with God, individuals ought to respond to suffering with love; and Letter Five concludes that suffering is actually born of God to draw the individual closer to God. Thus, where Letter Two illustrates certain instances of the dramatic monologue's inversion of power and Letter Four illustrates certain instance of the dramatic monologue's inversion of suffering, Letter Five exemplifies certain instances of the dramatic monologue's inversion of purpose for that suffering. Lawrence tells us that the purpose of pain and suffering is to bring us nearer to God (Letter 5, par. 1). However, because these dramatic monologues are rooted in self, the speakers are unable to recognize the benefits of suffering and, therefore, consider it a blight that needs to be eradicated. Since the

eradication of suffering is the goal of the speaker, the whole form of the dramatic monologue devolves into a human-centered cry for the eradication of suffering in an era when "God has not said a word" ("Porphyria's Lover" l. 60).

Since God has not said a word, the reader is left with a human-centered universe, and an inversion and secularization of prayer. Thinking of the dramatic monologue in this way breathes new life into Nichols' theory of dialogism. Nichols adequately establishes the dialogic nature of the dramatic monologue, but I am suggesting that this dialogue can be thought of in a new way. The form of prayer that was propagated during the Victorian era through works like Wesley's Anglicized Lawrence undergoes an inversion at the hand of Browning, and, by considering this inversion, the reader comes face to face with a common dilemma of the Victorian era. Returning to Brother Lawrence illuminates this dilemma. Thus far only five of Lawrence's letters have been considered; however, Wesley's abridgement also contains four conversations with Brother Lawrence which, when compared with "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," help illustrate the spiritual angst that was present in Victorian England.

The silent God at the end of "Porphyria's Lover" perhaps best describes the sort of angst that many Victorians were feeling. Recent scientific discoveries had thrown standard religious ideology into flux, and a great deal of skepticism was evident in England's poetic minds. The implications of this skepticism are exemplified by the inversions within "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," because "Soliloquy" illustrates an impotence that joins with a host of feelings that were present in the minds of the religious during the Victorian period. They could identify with Browning's frustrated speaker, despite his villainy. The speaker in Browning's poem is obviously the villain, and, when

seen in conjunction with the historical Brother Lawrence, he is exponentially vilified; however, there is still that tinge of empathy that the reader has for him, and this is slightly disturbing, because it indicts the reader. There is a side of the reader's self that identifies with the speaker of "Soliloquy" – even though he is pathological. There was a reluctance for living up to the standards of a Brother Lawrence, because those standards demanded simplicity. As demonstrated earlier, the Lawrence of the poem cares nothing for the structures of theology that his fellow monk deems all-important, and his historical counterpart actually strives to do away with these structures altogether in an effort to live simply in God's presence. This kind of living demands a certain naiveté and compliant deference to the institutional authority towards which many of Browning's pathological characters gravitate. The speaker of "Soliloquy," for instance, desperately wants Lawrence's simplicity, but his intellect and desire for power are a hindrance. This dichotomy drives the speaker in "Soliloquy" mad with desire. He cannot have what Lawrence has, so he seeks to take it from him. But this is a futile effort. Ultimately, then, the reader is left with an impotent speaker – a speaker who cannot have nor gain the childlike faith which the Lawrence of the poem illustrates and the Lawrence of history validates.

The four conversations that Wesley's abridgement includes can help us perceive the dynamic between the speaker of "Soliloquy" and Brother Lawrence as a commentary upon aspects of Victorian English culture. The first two of these conversations seem to summarize many of the points found within the letters, and I will not rehash those comments here, but they also contain information which moves beyond the theology of the letters into very broad inversions that were characteristic of the spirit of the age.

Isobel Armstrong is perhaps most responsible for noting the spirit of tension that was present during this age. She argues, "Victorian poetry is seen in terms of transition. It is on the way somewhere. It is either on the way from Romantic poetry, or on the way to modernism. It is situated between two kinds of excitement, in which it appears not to participate" (1). But participate it must, because the Victorians were experiencing the very tension that allowed for an age of transition. Whether they were specifically wrestling through difficulties of faith or encouraging the change to take place, their writings added to the discourse of secularization.[22]

Therefore, situating Browning within this history is imperative, but there is a lot critically at stake in doing this.[23] He certainly went through a phase of identification with the atheism and decadence of Byron and Shelley (Ingram 13-29), but it is also clear that he quietly returned to a faith that he perhaps never fully embraced (Ingram 30-45).[24] That, certainly, is a loaded statement, but it allows us to situate Browning on both sides of the debate. He can, for us, serve as the ideal scholar. He is practicing a "Discourse of Inquiry" that can serve as a model for us today as we seek to negotiate religion and scholarship. [25] The final conversation which Wesley includes in his abridgement perhaps

[22]The ideas behind secularization theory are vast and complex. They were perhaps best articulated first by Max Weber's argument in 1904 that religiosity would begin to assume secular forms (like capitalism). The debate is still alive and well today as the most recent edition of *NLH* suggests. For more information on the current manifestations of secularization theory, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's book *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* and Michael Kauffman's article in *NLH* entitled "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession."
[23] A mere trip to the library will show just how much is at stake. There are entire sections devoted to Browning as a "religious" writer, and also entire sections which seek to label him as a master subverter.
[24] A good place to start when considering the depth, nuance, and sophistication of Browning's religious thought is "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Caliban upon Setebos."
[25] The phrase, "Discourse of Inquiry" is not original with me. Douglas Downs in his essay for *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, "True Believers, Real Scholars, and Real True Believing Scholars: Discourses of Inquiry and Affirmation in the Composition Classroom," delineates the difficulties which students from various faith backgrounds have when approaching scholarly endeavors. He argues

best illustrates how "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" operates as a participant within the secularization that took place within the nineteenth century.

Beaufort records in the first paragraph of the fourth conversation, "He told me, that all consisted in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead to GOD; that we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with him, with freedom and simplicity" (Conversation 4, par. 1). Browning's speaker has not renounced everything which does not lead to God. Instead he embraces those things which do not lead to God. His Phariseeism allows for him to embrace his own pride as a thing which causes him to despise Lawrence's simplicity, and he is anything but "free" and "simple." He is bound by his hatred of Lawrence. He is bound by his envy. And he is unable to release his grip on explanations and control. Lawrence, on the other hand, has faith. That Browning communicates all of this while illustrating the tension of the Victorians is central to the meaning of the poem, and, by recognizing these concepts, my desire is to open discussion on a heretofore unthought-of connection between the religiosity and poetry of the Victorian period.

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that their faith background encourages a Discourse of Affirmation; whereas academia encourages a Discourse of Inquiry, and it is often difficult to reconcile the two.

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APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF WESLEY'S EDITION OF LAWRENCE'S WRITING

The 30 volume, 1821 edition of Wesley's *A Christian Library* abridges *The Practice of the Presence of God* into five letters and four conversations which are recorded in indirect discourse. These begin with no introduction other than a heading. The letters are labeled "LETTER 1:," "LETTER 2:," etc., and the conversations "CONVERSATION 1:," "CONVERSATION 2:," etc. Only the first letter contains any additional information (i.e. "FROM B. LAURENCE, TO THE REV."). The conversations, on the other hand, contain dates from when they occurred and are significantly longer than the letters. The following is a summary of the content of each of these letters and conversations. It is apparent that Lawrence was writing to someone that was plagued with sickness, since suffering, pain, and disease are all standard themes of his letters. Letters Three and Four also indicate that Lawrence may have been older when writing these letters, because he makes numerous statements about his approaching death (Letter 2, par. 4; Letter 3, par. 3; and Letter 4, par. 1).

Letter One – Inversion of Audience

Letter One contains 13 paragraphs, and is the longest letter. Lawrence begins by detailing a conversation with a fellow monk who told him that he must pass through various stages in order to reach the "life of grace" which was the "consummation" of a "spiritual life" (par. 2). Lawrence, however, was "discouraged" (par. 2) by the

methodological nature of these stages, and did not follow them. He details that his own methods were far from perfect, and he spent his first ten monastic years in uncertainty of his spiritual state (par. 3-4). As he meditated on passing the remainder of his life in this way, he records that he was changed "all at once" (par. 5), and then chronicles how this change manifested itself in his life (par. 6-7). He claims to have felt "a profound inward peace" (par. 5), which came as a result of consigning himself entirely to God. He says that he has "no will but that of God" (par. 7), and he contrasts the assurance which comes from giving his will over to God with the uncertainty that he previously experienced (par. 8). The remainder of the letter explicates how Lawrence maintained "an habitual, silent, and secret conversation with God" (par. 8), and his final paragraph warns against referring to his methods as "delusion" (par. 13). He says that, even if practicing God's presence is a delusion, fixing the delusion is the responsibility of God. Lawrence ends by requesting the opinion of the letter's recipient.

Letter Two – Inversion of Power

This letter begins with a discourse on suffering, but links it to the previous letter by stating that God "will loose you [from the cross of your suffering] when he thinks fit" (par. 1). This statement allows Lawrence to launch into a treatise on God's sovereignty. He says, "Pains and sufferings would be a paradise to me, while I should suffer with my God: and the greatest pleasure would be hell to me, if I could relish them without him; all my consolation would be to suffer something for his sake" (par. 4). He even ascribes the success of medicine to God (par. 3), and further encourages the reader to "be satisfied with the condition in which GOD places you" (par. 4). Finally, in his last paragraph,

Lawrence encourages the reader that God is his or her only "comfort" during "affliction" (par. 5).

Letter Three – Inversion of Request

Letter Three contains further discourse on sickness and affliction. Lawrence says "GOD often permits that we should suffer a little to purify our souls, and oblige us to continue with him" (par. 1), and he indicates that our understanding of that principle can do much to alleviate "all bodily diseases" (par. 1). Next Lawrence builds upon his previous letter by explicating how to practice the presence of God in affliction. He suggests, "Take courage, offer him your pains incessantly, pray to him for strength to endure them. Above all, pray for grace to entertain yourself often with GOD, and forget him the least you can" (par. 2). Lawrence concludes the final two paragraphs with humility over his present state as a sinner "deserve[ing] the severest discipline" (par. 3), and as "the most wretched man alive" (par. 4).[26] Finally, he closes this letter with a question that becomes rather standard: "Do you pray for me, as I for you" (par. 4).

Letter Four – Inversion of Suffering

This is the shortest letter, and contains only two paragraphs. These paragraphs encourage Lawrence's recipient to develop the frame of mind that "receive[s] them [sufferings] with love" (par. 1). He says that, by "mak[ing] our heart a spiritual temple, wherein to adore him [God] incessantly . . . watch[ing] continually over ourselves, that we may not do, nor say, nor think, any thing that may displease him" (par. 1), our "suffering will become full of consolation" (par. 1). In the second and final paragraph, Lawrence empathizes with

[26] These comments are reminiscent of the apostle Paul's claim to be the chief of sinners (I Timothy 3:15).

his recipient, but advises, “Knock, persevere in knocking, and . . . he [God] will open to you in his due time” (Letter 4, par. 2).

Letter Five – Inversion of Purpose (for the suffering)

Letter Five is the final epistle from Lawrence that is recorded in Wesley’s abridgement, and Lawrence introduces this letter by saying that “God knoweth best what is needful for us, and all that he does is for our good” (par. 1), and he paradoxically notes, “it is our loving father who abases and distresses us” (par. 1). When we realize this, Lawrence claims, “our sufferings will lose their bitterness, and become even matter of consolation” (par. 1). He furthermore says that sufferings should increase our “love of God,” because “if our love of God were great, we should love him in pains and pleasures” (par. 2). The third and final paragraph pleads with the reader to seek the presence of God, and Lawrence invites, “Let us begin to be devoted to him in good earnest. Let us cast every thing besides out of our hearts” (par. 3).

Conversation One

Conversation One takes place on August 3rd 1666, and details how J. de Beaufort met Brother Lawrence. Lawrence shares with Beaufort a brief biography which chronicles how he lived before and after his conversion. Beaufort chronicles that Lawrence’s reasoning for secluding himself in a monastery was to, punish himself for his sins. However, Lawrence comments that “GOD had disappointed him, he having met with nothing but satisfaction in that state” (par. 2). The rest of the conversation details Lawrence’s outlook on life. He suggests “that we should establish ourselves in a sense of GOD’S presence, by continually conversing with him” (par. 2), and continues that “the way of faith was the spirit Of the Church, and that this alone was sufficient to bring us to

a high degree of perfection [*sic*]" (par. 3). Finally Lawrence reveals to J. de Beaufort that he is not naïve. He tells Beaufort that he does not "wonder" at the sin of the world, but is rather "surprised there were not more, considering the malice sinners were capable of" (par. 6). He concludes by encouraging the practice of the presence of God to these sinners and to Beaufort. He further admonishes Beaufort that he would disciple him, but if Beaufort had other designs for coming, he "ought no more to visit him" (par. 6).

Conversation Two

This conversation fills out the biography found in the Conversation One. Conversation Two takes place nearly a month later on September 28th 1666. Lawrence states that he had an anxiety about being damned, but, once he learned to place God's will at the forefront of his mind, he experienced freedom from that anxiety (pars. 2 and 3). Lawrence then discourses on the practicing of virtue and the practicing of vice (pars. 4 and 5), and spends the remainder of the conversation talking about his life at the monastery. Beaufort reveals that Lawrence is the monastery's cook, and he has "naturally a great aversion" to it (par. 7), but, because he "accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of GOD" (par. 7), he "was very well pleased with the post" (par. 8). Lawrence further converses about how to deal with failings. Beaufort records that Lawrence "was very sensible of his faults, but he was not discouraged by them; that he confessed them to GOD, and when he had so done, he peaceably resumed his usual practice of love and adoration" (par. 9). Lawrence ends the conversation on this same note by saying, "When I fail in my duty, I readily acknowledge it, saying, I am used to do so; I shall never do otherwise, if I am left to myself" (par. 16). However, between these two similar thoughts, Lawrence speaks about the neutrality of religious "exercises" (par.

10). He says that they are "useless, but as 'they serve to arrive at union with GOD by love [*sic*]" (par. 10), and recommends instead "That we ought without anxiety to expect the pardon of our sins from the blood of JESUS CHRIST, only endeavoring to love him with all our hearts" (par. 14).

Conversation Three

Conversation Three takes place two months later on November 22nd 1666, and deals with the issue of straying from the presence of God. Lawrence indicates what he does when God has not been at the forefront of his mind. He merely "acknowledge[s] his wretchedness to GOD" and "return[s] to him, with so much the greater trust in him" (par. 1). Throughout the conversations, the reader gets the feeling that Lawrence spends a great deal of time meditating, and, since his jobs are rather menial, he can meditate even while working; however, in Conversation Three, he comments that "when he had business to do, he did not think of it beforehand; but when it was time to do it, he found in GOD, as in a clear mirror, all that was fit for him to do" (par. 3).[27] And Lawrence concludes that it is *only* by trusting and focusing upon God that the Christian advances. He claims "That many do not advance in the Christian progress, because they stick in penances, and particular exercises, while they neglect the love of GOD, which is the end; and this appeared plainly by their works, and was the reason why we see so little solid virtue" (par. 6). Almost as an afterthought, Beaufort records one last comment from Lawrence: "That there needed neither art nor science for going to GOD, but only a heart

[27] This is reminiscent of Jesus' message to his followers in Luke 12:11-12, "[11]When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; [12]for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

resolutely determined to apply itself to nothing but him, or for his sake, and to love him only" (par. 7).

Conversation Four

The final conversation which is recorded in Wesley's abridgement takes place a little over a year after Conversation Three, on November 25th 1667. Lawrence summarizes his theology and tells J. de Beaufort how he approaches God: "that all consisted in one hearty renunciation of every thing which we are sensible does not lead to GOD; that we might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with him, with freedom and simplicity" (par. 1). Lawrence calls this a "continual conversation with God" (par. 1). Renunciation and continual conversation are at the core of Lawrence's theology. He furthers, "GOD always gave us light in our doubts" (par. 2), and we should merely do our business to the glory of God and not for "men" (par. 2). Lawrence also indicates that accustomed times of prayer are "delusion[s]" (par. 3), and, instead, we ought always to be in prayer. To this he adds, "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of GOD" (par. 6), because God "regards not the greatness of the work" (par. 6). Lawrence couples his previous thoughts with the idea that only being willing to attempt great things in the name of God is another delusion which humanity should be rid of. Lawrence moves on to summarize religion as "faith, hope and charity" (par. 7).[28] Finally, in paragraph nine, Lawrence notes that Christians should become accustomed to pain and suffering and should use these as vehicles "to become in this life the most perfect worshippers of GOD we can possibly be [*sic*]" (par. 9). The remainder of the conversation is filled with principals that have been explored in other letters or conversations. Beaufort again

[28] This is almost the exact wording of I Corinthians 13:13

records that Lawrence is the order's cook (par. 11), and that he prayed before having to perform any particular duty. If Lawrence found the duty done well "he returned thanks to GOD; if otherwise, he asked pardon; and without being discouraged, he set his mind right again, and continued his exercise of the presence of GOD" (par. 13). At the end of this conversation, as a final paragraph, J. de Beaufort commends the reader to think on Lawrence's life as "a stronger inducement than any arguments he could propose" (par. 14) for the practice of the presence of God.

APPENDIX B

A PICTORIAL TOUR OF LAWRENCE'S CHURCH AND MONASTERY

On a recent trip to Paris, I discovered the location of Lawrence's monastery. It is located just northwest of the Luxemborg Gardens in Paris, France. I was aided in this endeavor by a recent edition of *The Practice of the Presence of God* which included a layout of the city block during Lawrence's time. That schema was dated, so it took a little ingenuity to find the monastery's current location. The church still stands and is open for tours, but the monastery has been converted into a Catholic Seminary (Institut Catholique de Paris). Some vestiges of its prior history remain, so I would like to take you on a little tour:

The doors to the church

This is the front of the church, it is the view you get when you traverse through the front doors.

If you turn around you will see the beautiful pipe organ at the back of the church.

As you walk back out the front doors of the church this is the architecture directly above them.

The seminary (and former monastery) is in the back of the church, so this is a view of the side of the church as you go around back.

This is a picture from the back of the church (what is now the seminary), and, if I am judging correctly, the building to the right is part of Lawrence's former monastery.

This is another picture of the buildings that I believe to be the former monastery.

As you complete your orbit of the church, this is what, in Lawrence's time, would have been the courtyards.