

Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"  
(1839; 1842)

I

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!  
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming? 5  
Oh, that rose has prior claims--  
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?  
Hell dry you up with its flames!

II

At the meal we sit together:  
Salve tibi! I must hear 10  
Wise talk of the kind of weather,  
Sort of season, time of year:  
Not a plenteous cork-crop: scarcely  
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt:  
What's the Latin name for "parsley"? 15  
What's the Greek name for Swine's Snout?

III

Whew! We'll have our platter burnished,  
Laid with care on our own shelf!  
With a fire-new spoon we're furnished,  
And a goblet for ourself, 20  
Rinsed like something sacrificial  
Ere 'tis fit to touch our chaps —  
Marked with L. for our initial!  
(He-he! There his lily snaps!)

IV

Saint, forsooth! While brown Dolores 25  
Squats outside the Convent bank  
With Sanchicha, telling stories,  
Steeping tresses in the tank,  
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,  
— Can't I see his dead eye glow, 30  
Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?  
(That is, if he'd let it show!)

V

When he finishes refection,  
Knife and fork he never lays  
Cross-wise, to my recollection, 35  
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. 40

VI

Oh, those melons? If he's able  
We're to have a feast! so nice!  
One goes to the Abbot's table,  
All of us eager to get a slice.  
How go on your flowers? None double? 45  
Not one fruit-sort can you spy?  
Strange! And I, too, at such trouble,  
Keep them close-nipped on the sly!

VII

There's a great text in Galatians,  
Once you trip on it, entails 50  
Twenty-nine distinct damnations,  
One sure, if another fails.  
If I trip him just a-dying,  
Sure of heaven as sure can be,  
Spin him round and send him flying 55  
Off to hell, a Manichee?

VIII

Or, my scrofulous French novel,  
On grey paper with blunt type!  
Simply glance at it, you grovel  
Hand and foot in Belial's gripe: 60  
If I double down its pages  
At the woeful sixteenth print,  
When he gathers his greengages,  
Ope a sieve and slip it in't?

IX

Or, there's Satan! — one might venture 65  
Pledge one's soul to him, yet leave  
Such a flaw in the indenture  
As he'd miss it till, past retrieve,  
Blasted lay that rose-acacia  
We're so proud of! Hy, Zy, Hine . . . 70  
'St, there's Vespers! Plena gratia  
Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r — you swine!