When I was a schoolboy, Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” was a standard item in the English curriculum. It had many features calculated to excite the minds of the young, foremost among them a ruthless, egotistical tyrant of such power and vanity that he could openly admit to having ordered the execution of his own wife for the “crime” of being too pleasant to others. Critics have not been of one mind about the meaning of the poem, or even the psychology of its ducal speaker. Robert Langbaum, who regards himself as something of an authority on the poem, writes, “It is because the duke’s motive for telling the story is inadequate, and because the situation is never resolved in that the utterance is not quite directed to the auditor and does not accomplish anything, that we look for a resolution in the duke’s life outside the poem” [my italics, indicating where I think Langbaum mistaken]. William Harmon declares, “The duke is dignified and cagey but not quite cagey enough. Some inner compulsion, probably an overwhelming sense of guilt, has compelled him to return to the scene and situation of his crime and to confess.” This seems to me equally mistaken.

Browning’s duke is based on Alfonso d’Este, duke of Ferrara, whose first wife died under mysterious circumstances only three years after her marriage. Like historical novelists of our day, Browning allowed himself some latitude in creating his psychological portrait. But he was a keen student of history, and he would have known all about the moral vagaries of Italian Renaissance princes, a topic Shakespeare himself was acquainted with. Regarding the d’Este family, Jacob Burkhardt writes:

Within the palace frightful deeds were perpetrated; a princess was beheaded (1425) for alleged adultery with a stepson; legitimate and illegitimate children fled from the court, and even abroad their lives were threatened by assassins sent in pursuit of them (1471). Plots from without were incessant; the bastard of a bastard tried to wrest the crown from the lawful heir, Hercules I; this latter is said afterwards (1493) to have poisoned his wife on discovering that she, at the instigation of her brother, Ferrente of Naples, was going to poison him.

Confident, audacious, vain, Browning’s duke knows just what he’s up to, and has calculated to a nicety the effect his words will have on the envoy who has come to treat with him about a second marriage, and is acting as the agent of the count of Tyrol, whose court is at Innsbruck, Austria. Underneath the duke’s connoisseurship, civility, and boastfulness, two stipulations are meant to be made crystal clear to the family of the potential bride: (1) The duke is a man of expensive tastes who will expect a dowry commensurate with the distinction of his noble family, and (2) he will also expect nothing but absolute submission and obedience from anyone he deigns to marry. This is the “motive” for his elaborate discourse. He feels no more guilt than Shakespeare’s Antonio in The Tempest, who plots the murder of his brother, Prospero. The duke’s conscience is as untroubled as Machiavelli tells us a prince’s ought to
be. Doubtless this is chilling, even monstrous; yet there have been such men. That such brutal considerations should present themselves openly during the negotiations preliminary to a marriage contract should not astonish us when we recall that marriage among the nobility was largely a mercenary and dynastic matter, in which love played little if any role.

Richard Howard, a poet and professor of English at Columbia University, has written a brilliant sequel to the Browning poem, predicated on the dramatic situation as outlined above. His “speaker” is one Nikolaus Mardruz, the envoy to whom Browning’s duke has recently spoken, and who is now reporting (by written message) on that interview along with relevant observations, to his principal, the count of Tyrol. He includes comments omitted in Browning’s version: for example, the duke’s mention of “the relative consolations of semblance,” a curious turn of phrase, suggesting that the duke is (1) so old, or (2) so ill, or (3) so refined that he now prefers portraits to their subjects. This can mean that he has moved beyond sexual appetites, but it can also mean that he places no high value on the lives of others. As a diplomat/intermediary, Mardruz is easily the equal of the duke in cunning, intrigue, and cool, strategic thinking. Howard has introduced matters of age, health, and cash flow into the plottings, and the drama is greatly enlarged thereby. He might well plan to continue the sequence.

A few words need to be said about the formal elements of the two poems. Browning’s is written, not (as William Harmon declares) in heroic couplets (which are also called “closed” couplets, and in which the sense is completed in the second line), but in what might be called defiantly unheroic couplets, full of enjambments, the speaker’s impetuosity of discourse flooding through the form almost without pause to rhyme. The headlong thrust of syntax makes the formality of rhyme a secondary, if not a negligible, factor. Howard’s poem is composed in syllabics, in which syllables are counted without regard to accents. Though he has disposed his lines on the page with great craft and seamless continuity, study will disclose that he has constructed an eight-line stanza, in which the line lengths, by syllable count, run: 9, 11, 5, 5, 11, 9, 5, 5. With the ninth line, this pattern is repeated. By ingeniously placing the first set of five-syllable lines toward the left margin of the poem, and the second set toward the right, Howard has presented a visually serpentine format, suggesting the deviousness and sinuosity of his speaker, and his Mardruz is worthy of Browning.

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps
Over my Lady's wrist too much,” or “Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat;” such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, —good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Nikolaus Mardruz to his
Master Ferdinand,
Count of Tyrol, 1565

A tribute to Robert Browning and in
celebration of the 65th birthday of Harold
Bloom, who made such tribute only natural.

My Lord recalls Ferrara? How walls
rise out of water yet appear to recede
identically
into it, as if
built in both directions: soaring and sinking...
Such mirroring was my first dismay—
my next, having crossed
the moat, was making
out that, for all its grandeur, the great
pile, observed close to, is close to a ruin!
(Even My Lord's most unstinting dowry may not restore these wasted precincts to what their deteriorating state demands.) Queasy it made me, glancing first down there at swans in the moat apparently feeding on their own doubled image, then up at the citadel, so high—or so deep, and everywhere those carved effigies of men and women, monsters among them crowding the ramparts and seeming at home in the dingy water that somehow held them up as if for our surveillance—ours? anyone's who looked! All that pretension of marble display, the whole improbable menagerie with but one purpose: 

having to be seen.

Such was the matter of Ferrara, and such the manner, when at last we met, of the Duke in greeting My Lordship's Envoy: life in fallen stone!

Several hours were to elapse, in the keeping of his lackeys, before the Envoy of My Lord the Count of Tyrol might see or even be seen to by His Grace the Duke of Ferrara, though from such neglect no deliberate slight need be inferred: now that I have had an opportunity—have had, indeed, the obligation—to fix on His Grace that perlustration or power of scrutiny for which (I believe) My Lord holds his Envoy's service in some favor still, I see that the Duke, by his own lights or, perhaps, more properly said, by his own tenebrosity, could offer some excuse for such cunctation . . .

Appraising a set of cameos just brought from Cairo by a Jew in his trust, His Grace had been rapt in connoisseurship, that study which alone can distract him from his wonted courtesy; he was affability itself, once his mind could be deflected from mere objects.

At last I presented (with those documents which in some detail describe and define the duties of both signators) the portrait of your daughter the Countess, observing the while his countenance. No fault was found with our contract, of which each article had been so correctly framed.
(if I may say so)
as to ascertain
a pre-nuptial alliance which must persuade
and please the most punctilious (and
impecunious)
of future husbands.

Principally, or (if I may be
allowed the amendment) perhaps Ducally,
His Grace acknowledged
himself beguiled by
Cranach’s portrait of our young Countess, praising
the design, the hues, the glaze—the frame!
and appeared averse,
for a while, even
to letting the panel leave his hands!
Examining those same hands, I was convinced
that no matter what
the result of our
(at this point, promising) negotiations,
your daughter’s likeness must now remain
“for good,” as we say,
among Ferrara’s
treasures, already one more trophy
in His Grace’s multifarious holdings,
like those marble busts
lining the drawbridge,
like those weed-stained statues grinning up at us
from the still moat, and—inside as well
as out—those grotesque
figures and faces
fastened to the walls. So be it!

Real
bother (after all, one painting, for Cranach
—and My Lord—need be
no great forfeiture)
commenced only when the Duke himself led me
out of the audience-chamber and
laboriously
(he is no longer
a young man) to a secret penhouse
high on the battlements where he can indulge
those despotic tastes
he denominates,
half smiling over the heartless words,
“the relative consolations of semblance.”
“Sir, suppose you draw
that curtain,” smiling
in earnest now, and so I sought—
but what appeared a piece of drapery proved
a painted deceit!
My embarrassment
afforded a cue for audible laughter,
and only then His Grace, visibly
relishing his trick,
turned the thing around,
whereupon appeared, on the reverse,
the late Duchess of Ferrara to the life!
Instanter the Duke
praised the portrait
so readily provided by one Pandolf—
a monk by some profane article
attached to the court,
hence answerable
for taking likenesses as required
in but a day’s diligence, so it was claimed . . .
Myself I find it
but a mountebank’s
proficiency—another chicane, like that
illusive curtain, a waxwork sort
of nature called forth:
cold legerdemain!

Though extranea such as the hares
copulating!, the doves, and a full-blown rose
were showily limned,
I could not discern
aught to be loved in that countenance itself,
likely to rival, much less to excel
the life illumined
in Cranach’s image
of our Countess, which His Grace had set
beside the dead woman’s presentment. . . . And took,
so evident was
the supremacy,
no further pains to assert Fra Pandolf’s skill.
One last hard look, whereupon the Duke
resumed his discourse
in an altered tone,
now some unintelligible rant
of stooping—His Grace chooses “never to stoop”
when he makes reproof. . . .
My Lord will take this
as but a figure: not only is the Duke
no longer young, his body is so
queerly misshapen
that even to speak
of “not stooping” seems absurdity:
the creature is stooped, whether by cruel
or impartial cause—say
Time or the Tempter—
I shall not venture to hypothecate. Cause
or no cause, it would appear he marked
some motive for his
“reproof,” a mortal
chastisement in fact inflicted on
his poor Duchess, put away (I take it so)
for smiling—at whom?
Brother Pandolf? or
some visitor to court during the sitting?
—too generally, if I construe
the Duke’s clue rightly,
to survive the terms
of his . . . severe protocol. My Lord,
at the time it was delivered to me thus,
the admonition
if indeed it was
any such thing, seemed no more of a menace
than the rest of his rodomontade;
item, he pointed,
as we toiled downstairs,
to that bronze Neptune by our old Claus
(there must be at least six of them cluttering
the Summer Palace
at Innsbruck), claiming
it was “cast in bronze for me.” Nonsense, of course.

But upon reflection, I suppose
we had better take
the old reprobate
at his unspeakable word. . . . Why, even
assuming his boasts should be as plausible
as his avarice,
no “cause” for dismay:
once ensconced here as the Duchess, your daughter
need no more apprehend the Duke’s
murderous temper
than his matchless taste.

For I have devised a means whereby
the dowry so flagrantly pursued by our
insolvent Duke (“no
just pretense of mine
be disallowed” indeed!), instead of being
paid as he pleads in one globose sum,
should drip into his
coffers by degrees—
say, one fifth each year—then after five
such years, the dowry itself to be doubled,
always assuming
that Her Grace enjoys
her usual smiling health. The years are her
ally in such an arbitration,
and with confidence
My Lord can assure
the new Duchess (assuming her Duke
abides by these stipulations and his own
propensity for
accumulating
“semblances”) the long devotion (so long as
he lasts ) of her last Duke... Or more likely,
if I guess aright
your daughter’s intent,
of that young lordling I might make so
bold as to designate her next Duke, as well...

Ever determined in
My Lordship’s service,
I remain his Envoy
to Ferrara as to the world.

Nikolaus Mardruz.