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# Robert Browning's Necropoetics

RENÉE FOX

## I. Introduction: The Limits of Reanimation

When Robert Browning published his 1868-89 book-length “murder poem,” *The Ring and the Book*, his reputation as a poet “with special gifts of intellect and originality” that were at the same time put in the service of a poetics of great “crudity” and “jolting violence” seemed once again confirmed. “I felt . . . like a creature with one leg and one wing, half hopping, half flying,” Browning’s friend William Allingham said after reading the poem’s first volume, while others characterized the poem as “incongruous materials” incapable of forming a “harmonious whole,” or as simultaneously “life-like” and a “morbid anatomy.”<sup>2</sup> These friends and reviewers, torn as they were between awe at the poem’s intellectual ambition and disgust at its aesthetic execution, envisioned their ambivalence as states of bodily transformation and incomplete states at that: halfway from legs to wings, from parts to a whole, from life to death. Without acknowledging directly the grotesque corporeality so prevalent in many of Browning’s most well-known dramatic monologues, these readers nonetheless see the almost-changed body as a metaphor for Browning’s poetic strangeness: a strangeness characterized by the formal tension, as the historian Thomas Carlyle would have it, between “an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines” and a long dramatic monologue, or, as Browning himself wrote in his “Essay on Shelley,” between poetry that “reproduces things external” and poetry that is the “radiance and aroma of [the poet’s] personality.”<sup>3</sup>

In Browning’s dramatic monologues, as in the responses above, the changing body—specifically, in the monologues, the once-dead body, the almost-alive-again body—is a locus for aesthetic experimentation that both critiques poetry’s inevitably subjective relation to facts—historical facts, observable facts, and the facts of literary influence—and uses that relationship as the basis for generic innovation. The reanimated body, whether appearing in poems like *The Ring and the Book* or in shorter dramatic monologues like “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess,” becomes a figure through which Browning considers the fraught relation between unassailable historical materiality and original aesthetic practice—between the dictates of what has

come before and the desire to create something new out of it. The dramatic monologue, in its dual capacity functioning as a critical and always-ironic foil to the multiple projects of aesthetic “resurrection” so in vogue during the nineteenth century—the Arthurian revival in art and literature, the vogue for museum exhibitions that recreated ancient tombs, and phenomena like magic lantern shows and spirit photography—as a form becomes both a self-conscious vehicle for poems of reanimation and a mode of reanimation itself. While critics have argued that we can see the dramatic monologue as “a form of verbal resuscitation of the dead, a quasi-Spiritualist voicing of dead men and women,”<sup>4</sup> and Victorian reviewers especially found in Tennyson’s dramatic monologues “the secret of the transmigration of the soul,” dramatic monologues in which the dead come to life in turn call our attention to the limits of the poet’s reanimating power by exposing the inherent subjectivity of any resuscitative poetic project.<sup>5</sup> These monologues embody the fictive and necessarily inventive nature of aesthetic resuscitation: nothing can come back from the dead unless the poet reanimates it. Browning uses his dramatic monologues to draw an analogy between corporeal reanimation and poetic practice, and in doing so probes, critiques, and reinvents the process by which new, “living” poetry can emerge from the intransigent bodies of the past. His “necropoetics” bring long-dead voices back to life, but not with the expectation that his monologists will speak truth. Rather, the inalterable fact of their deaths creates the condition necessary for Browning to scrutinize and to relish the imaginative truths his own poetics of aesthetic resurrection could reveal.

## II. Reanimating Elizabeth

A twelve-book *magnum opus*, *The Ring and the Book* opens as the poet insists that his work is to “resuscitate” rather than to “create,” to “start the dead alive” but not to “make” out of nothing as God can make.<sup>6</sup> The poem, which uses a series of dramatic monologues in blank verse to recount the story of a seventeenth-century murder, trial, and execution, conceives poetry’s relation to history as an effort of reanimation. As the poem recasts this relation in turn as the relation between the living and the dead, between modern innovation and old forms, and between art and facts, the notion that poetry can do as much—but only just as much—as reanimating the dead becomes a way for Browning to theorize an imaginative modern poetics that remembers, but refuses to be bound by, the past: a modern poetics, lodged in the ironically resuscitative form of the dramatic monologue, that I am calling “necropoetics.”<sup>7</sup> The “past,” in *The Ring and the Book*, is threefold. It is Browning’s romantic past, incarnate in the poetic influence of his much-beloved dead wife. It is the literary past, manifest in the subjective poetics of the Shelleyan Romanticism with which the poem engages. And it is the past as Victorian historians such as Michelet and Carlyle conceived it, presented

as the testimonial historical facts from which *The Ring and the Book* emerges.<sup>8</sup> By reanimating—rather than imitating, rejecting, or worshipping—these three embodiments of the past, Browning develops a necropoetic aesthetic that reflects upon and denaturalizes the connection between memory and creativity, between inheriting the dead and generating something life-like. The task of the poet, as the poet-narrator of *The Ring and the Book* describes it in Book I, is to “enter, spark-like, put old powers to play, / Push out lines to the limit” (l.755-756): poetry will emerge from the active fusion of the poet’s orchestrating *anima* and the dead forms to which he has access. Rather than proposing a treatise of radical formal change, *The Ring and the Book* offers a galvanic theory of innovation (old body, new spark) in which poetry will always be a memorial project, both abolishing and obsessively remembering the dead in the resuscitative act of pushing old formal lines to new limits.

Adam Roberts has called *The Ring and the Book* “a poem explicitly figured as a séance,” but one whose ultimate presiding spirit is the dead Elizabeth Barrett Browning rather than the dead seventeenth-century Florentines whose voices Browning resurrects: a poem both haunted by and incessantly mourning Browning’s lost muse, a poem whose repeated “necromantic act” of giving voice to the dead constitutes Browning’s limitless “gift to Elizabeth Barrett.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the poem in some ways clearly memorializes Elizabeth<sup>10</sup>—the ring of its title belongs to her,<sup>11</sup> she is the Muse to whom the poet addresses himself in the first and last books, and the tale of the murdered Pompilia, trapped in a smothering, death-like marriage, clearly echoes Elizabeth’s own memory of being trapped in her father’s house before her elopement with Robert. As she told her friend Mrs. Martin, she looked “more dead than alive” on her wedding day, recalling her “morbid and desolate” years on Wimpole Street with “the sort of horror with which one would look to one’s graveclothes, if one had been clothed in them by mistake during a trance.” “I was buried that was the whole,” she wrote of her old life once she had escaped it.<sup>12</sup>

Yet while Elizabeth may be the poem’s presiding muse, she is only obliquely its chief object of mourning, and it is her absence, rather than her memory, that guides Browning’s aesthetic choices. Just as the necropoetic art of Browning’s dramatic monologues “needs” the deaths of its subjects, so too does the evolution of *The Ring and the Book* need the death of Elizabeth. Browning recognized *The Ring and the Book*, in part, as a monument to his isolation. His gripes about having to write the poem without help metaphorically dwell on Elizabeth’s absence by explicitly recalling the language Browning used in his courtship letters to describe Elizabeth’s muse-like role in his creative process. In 1862 Browning complained to Isa Blagden, who helped transcribe *Men and Women*, that he must “begin on [his] murder case” without her help as his amanuensis, repeating this line seven years later as a lament about solitude to another friend, Julia Wedgwood, in response to her harsh

criticism of *The Ring and the Book*.<sup>13</sup> “[I] pray you to observe that it has been a particularly weary business to write this whole long work by my dear self,” Browning wrote, “I who used always to be helped by an amanuensis—for, I cannot clearly see what is done, or undone, so long as it is thro’ the medium of my own hand-writing.”<sup>14</sup> By “amanuensis” he refers here to Isa rather than to Elizabeth, but these frustrated words bleakly and directly echo the words Browning once lovingly wrote to his not-yet-wife: “And dearest, I mean to take your advice and be quiet awhile and let my mind get used to its new medium of sight, seeing all things, as it does, thro’ you: and then, let all I have done be the prelude and the real work begin.”<sup>15</sup> Over their sixteen-year courtship and marriage, Elizabeth’s sensibility had come to be the metaphorical “handwriting” through which Browning viewed his poetic project, but work on *The Ring and the Book*, in which Browning associated the sight of his own handwriting with his “weary” solitude, came to be marked by the dearth of this sensibility. The absent Elizabeth becomes the *raison d’être* for the obfuscating and deferred conditions of writing, so thematically prevalent in the text of *The Ring and the Book* itself, to which Browning alludes when he writes that he “cannot clearly see what is done, or undone.”

Even more concretely, Elizabeth, who was alive when Browning found the “Old Yellow Book” that would provide the “crude facts” of *The Ring and the Book*, was appalled by the contents of the book and indifferent to its creative possibilities. As Browning admitted once to Wedgwood, “[my wife] never took the least interest in the story, so much as to wish to inspect the papers. It seems better so to me, but is it better?” In the words of one of Browning’s recent biographers, “Elizabeth took an instant dislike to the whole business. She was repelled by the sordidness of the tale and refused even to leaf through the papers. Bowing to the judgment of his flesh-and-blood Muse, Browning put aside his own ambitions for the Old Yellow Book.”<sup>16</sup> Browning could bring *The Ring and the Book* into being only when Elizabeth was no longer there to stop him. Yet when Browning finally returned to the Old Yellow Book years later and produced what he clearly believed to be his *magnum opus*, Julia Wedgwood’s first response to the poem is to see it as a poem determined—and fundamentally flawed—by Elizabeth’s absence: in one letter she writes, “Do you remember once saying to me that your Wife was quite wanting in—I am not sure of the exact words, but the sense was, the scientific interest in evil?—I think you said, the physiology of wrong. I feel as if that interest were in you unduly predominant.” In another, she remarked more succinctly, “I felt as if I were reading what you had lost in your wife.”<sup>17</sup> This comment is oddly phrased, for what Browning lost in his wife certainly was not a love for the grotesque: as Elizabeth wrote, she watched with “horror” the “ghastly” funeral processions that Browning so loved to watch, and was disgusted when he brought home a human skeleton and started gleefully disarticulating its bones.<sup>18</sup> “[M]y

wife would have subscribed to every one of your bad opinions of the book," Browning replied resignedly to Wedgwood, recognizing that Elizabeth had never shared his interest in what he called "morbid cases."<sup>19</sup>

As these exchanges between Browning and Wedgwood demonstrate, by the time Browning had completed writing *The Ring and the Book*, he recognized that his masterpiece ran wholly contrary to Elizabeth's aesthetic sensibility—would, in fact, have offended her. Browning began his "murder poem" as an homage to his dead wife and muse, only to realize when it was done that the pleasure it displays in "morbid cases" would have resulted in nothing but Elizabeth's "bad opinions." Yet even at its beginning, *The Ring and the Book* revises one of the most well-known passages of *Aurora Leigh*—its meditation on form in Book V—drawing attention to the grotesque morbidity that would mark Robert's departure from Elizabeth's influence.<sup>20</sup> The famous question Elizabeth Barrett Browning poses in *Aurora Leigh*—"What form is best for poems?"—and her answer:

Let me think  
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,  
As sovran nature does, to make the form;  
For otherwise we only imprison spirit  
And not embody<sup>21</sup>

returns in the sense and meter of one of the most important passages in Book I of *The Ring and the Book*:

No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,  
May so project his surplusage of soul  
In search of body, so add self to self  
By owning what lay ownerless before,—  
So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms. (I.722-726).

These two passages attempt to answer the same question about the development of poetic form, but while Barrett Browning's answer in *Aurora Leigh* resists the finality of form, seeing it rather as a natural, living, emerging order, Browning's answer in *The Ring and the Book* suggests that form is an inert, pre-existing entity to be inhabited and re-awakened. Barrett Browning's lines are in almost regular iambic pentameter, broken only by the two hypercatalectic lines with the word "spirit" in them. We are meant to hear in these overflowing but still metrical lines the work of the spirit acting upon form: embodiment without imprisonment and freedom compassed by nature. Barrett Browning makes it clear in *Aurora Leigh* that form should always be simultaneously organic and bounded and should emerge from the present moment, as demonstrated by her famous diatribe against historical poetics that directly precedes her insistence on the natural emergence of form:

Nay, if there's room for poets in this world  
 A little overgrown, (I think there is),  
*Their sole work is to represent the age,*  
 Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing age,  
 That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires  
 .....  
 To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,  
 Cry out for togas and the picturesque,  
 Is fatal. (V.200-10, italics mine)

These lines avow a desire for form to emerge from the living—"living art, / Which thus presents and thus records true life," she calls it—rather than as a reinvention of what is dead and past (V.221-22). To "cry out for togas and the picturesque," to seek after the distant past, is "fatal" to poetry that Barrett Browning wants to be as "live" and "throbbing" as the age in which it is written.

In *Aurora Leigh*, "death inherits death" (V.199), but in *The Ring and the Book*, "something dead may get to live again" (I.729). Robert Browning, in stark opposition to his wife's acerbic dismissal of poems made out of five-hundred-year-old "chivalric bones" (V.198), imagines the poet's formal project as an act of reanimating the dead (I.712-772). While Browning, too, writes the passage above—"No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free, / May so project his surplusage of soul / In search of body, so add self to self / By owning what lay ownerless before,"—in mostly regular iambic pentameter, punctuated by an occasional spondee or trochee, his breaks from an almost hypnotic meter wake us at moments in which the poem specifically addresses form. The last line of the passage, "So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms —" (emphasis mine), in which I count six rather than five stresses in a line almost indivisible into feet, calls our attention to form by dismantling it, enacting the phrase "fill full" while also forcing us to pause on each verb and fully absorb the contemporary poet's formal project: finding, filling, and appropriating old forms.

This project becomes more complex as the passage continues and the vague language of bodies and souls morphs into language specifically about bringing the dead back to life:

That, although nothing which had never life  
 Shall get life from him, be, not having been,  
*Yet, something dead may get to live again,*  
 Something with too much life or not enough,  
 Which, either way imperfect, ended once:  
 An end whereat man's impulse intervenes,  
 Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,  
 Completes the incomplete and saves the thing. (I.727-734, italics mine)

Reanimation in this poem is an artistic power defined by its limitations: in these lines, by its material requirements—"Something with too much life or not enough / Which either way imperfect, ended once"—and by its distance from the creative power of God: "although nothing which had never life/Shall get life from him, be, not having been." Carol Christ has suggested that "the question for Browning is whether the animation of bodies is bringing the dead back to life or robbing graves to create phantoms" (p. 395) but the anxiety of reanimation in *The Ring and the Book* is less about the moral implications of what a poet can do than about the aesthetic implications of what a poet cannot do. As a statement of creative power, the negatives in these lines—although, nothing, never, not—all distinguish the work of the poet from "God's process" (l. 717) while simultaneously lodging the poet within a closed aesthetic system of "find[ing]" and "appropriat[ing] forms." The bodies of the dead become a compulsory basis for poetry as well as figures for the constraints of poetic tradition ("the appropriation of forms"): that is, both essential and delimiting, both the bones of possibility and the precinct of impossibility. While critics have suggested that this passage is about the "artistic will" that "can find form for something which had lived but is now in need of a completion," about "giving life through the technique of the artist,"<sup>22</sup> these lines care less about resuscitating through form than about resuscitating form itself.<sup>23</sup> "I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play, / Push lines out to the limit," the poet says a few lines later, suggesting that somewhere in the world is a pre-existing body (a form) into which the artist projects his life-giving impulse.

### III. Reanimating Shelley

This language of animation as aesthetic limitation is strongly reminiscent of Browning's famous "Essay on Shelley," written seventeen years before.<sup>24</sup> In this essay on Shelley, an introduction to a collection of letters, Browning compares galvanic energy to the likeliness of the "lower incitements" of a poet's soul "simulating the nobler inspiration," to achieve great poetry: "As soon will the galvanism that provokes to violent action the muscles of a corpse, induce it to cross the chamber steadily: sooner," Browning writes disparagingly (p. 1246). This comparison, overtly recollected in *The Ring and the Book* as the poet's feat to "mimic creation, galvanism for life" (l. 740) reminds us that the poem's obsession with the limitations of poetic form, and with its own relationship to the literary past, is often an explicit negotiation between subjective Romanticism and objective dramatic poetry as Browning defines them in his "Essay on Shelley."

Browning's strong affinity for Shelley, whom he read first at age fourteen when his mother gave him a book of Shelley's poems, has been well documented by critics for over a century.<sup>25</sup> Even by 1891, when his friend Alexandra Orr wrote *The Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, she notes that "it is



almost a commonplace that some measure of Shelleyan fancy is recognizable in 'Pauline,'" and while she insists upon Browning's "poetic individuality" being stronger than any set of influences, she also admits that Shelley remained for Browning "the greatest poet of his age" because "beyond all others, [Browning] believed [Shelley's poetic] exercise to have been prompted by the truest spiritual inspiration" (Orr, p. 39). While critics like Harold Bloom have classically seen Shelley in Browning's later work as a "repression," a "hidden God" whom Browning resists only in order to emulate—" [This] is Browning as he wished to have been, locked in a solitary struggle against the precursor-principle, but struggling in the visionary world of the precursor," Bloom (p. 204) says of "Childe Roland"—more recent critics have been less interested in Shelley's God-like place in Browning's imagination than in how Browning conceived the aims of the Romantic poets in relation to his own work. "Whether factual or mythified, alive or dead, human or immortal, the Romantic epipsyche became an increasingly problematic emblem that allegorized the male's unsatisfied desire for fusion," U. C. Knoepfelmacher has argued, suggesting that Browning's early dramatic monologues engage with the problem of finding an "'objective counterpart' for his subjective will and feelings."<sup>26</sup> Others have painted Browning's poetic trajectory as one that progresses smoothly "from self-conscious Romantic digressions to a more dramatic presentation of the story," from subjective poetry to objective poetry (to borrow Browning's terms from his "Essay on Shelley").<sup>27</sup> To understand Browning's work as a progression from one of these terms to the other, however, is to suggest, firstly, that he considered objective and subjective poetics to be wholly distinct from one another—a suggestion that his "Essay on Shelley" does not entirely support—and secondly, that his consciousness of the distinction mapped onto an evolution away from Romantic influence and dependence.

The "objective poet," Browning tells us at the beginning of the "Essay on Shelley," endeavors to "reproduce things external . . . with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men." The "thing fashioned" in this way, his poetry, "will of necessity be substantive, projected from himself and distinct" (p. 1243). Browning offers Shakespeare as the highest example of the objective poet (although he makes it quite clear that he is also referring to himself),<sup>28</sup> and argues that from Shakespeare's work, as from all objective poets, "we learn only what he intended we should learn by that particular exercise of his power,—the fact itself,—which . . . each of us receives for the first time as a creation" ("Essay," p. 1244). The objective poem is fact, a discrete, unmediated creation. The subjective poet, in contrast, "is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below, as to the one above him," a poet of Divine interiority rather than worldly exteriority whose work is "the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated" ("Essay," pp.

1244-45). Shelley, of course, is Browning's subjective poet *par excellence*, and in this essay both praising him and insisting upon the importance of Shelley's letters to an understanding of Shelley's poetry (in order to understand the subjective poet in any fundamental way "we must look deep into his human eyes" [p. 1244]), it would make sense to call subjective poetry close to the Divine, and objective poetry closer to man.

Yet the essay also wants to posit objective poetry, poetry that "speaks for itself" (i.e. Browning's own dramatic monologues) as equal in value to poetry steeped in personality (p. 1244): "It would be idle to inquire," he writes of the two poetic faculties, "which is the higher or even rarer endowment" (p. 1245). While the essay stands, in the words of Browning's friend Alexandra Orr, as "a tribute to the genius of Shelley," a "memorial of a very touching affection" to "a divinely inspired man" (pp. 178, 182, 180), it also rolls the task of homage into the simultaneous task of self-tribute: "If the subjective might seem to be the ultimate requirement of every age," Browning writes, "the objective, in the strictest state, must still retain its original value. For it is with this world, as starting point and basis alike, that we shall always have to concern ourselves" ("Essay," p. 1245). He reiterates this celebration of objectivity in a letter about *The Ring and the Book*, when he writes that the "business" of the poem has been "to explain fact"—for "this is God's world, as he made it for reasons of his own, and . . . to change its conditions is not to account for them."<sup>29</sup> Yet just as Browning imagines the classic contrast between Romantic subjective poetry and objective poetry in his essay as a cyclic process—each kind of poetry ultimately leading into the other<sup>30</sup>—so too does *The Ring and the Book* ultimately use its metaphor of objective reanimation to acknowledge and define an inherently subjective relation between poetry and its historical bones: bones both of fact and of form. Browning's initial presentation of an absolute distinction between objective and subjective poetics, followed by his inability to wholly articulate—perhaps even to wholly believe in—this binary, provides a useful, if troubling, tool for examining his thinking about aesthetic matters, especially in *The Ring and the Book*, as well as his actual practice in the historical monologues.

Browning's essay becomes a literary memorial to Shelley at the same time that it obsessively enacts a poet's desire to resist dissolving into his memorial object, to maintain the faltering fiction of a work of art "projected from himself and distinct." Yet his definition of the "objective poet" cannot be disentangled from the way he defines the "subjective poet," and his sense that the two may "issue hereafter from the same poet in successive perfect works" accounts for his own path from "Pauline" forward, as well as for his concession that only rarely does either objectivity or subjectivity in a poet manifest itself so prominently "as to be pronounced comparatively pure" ("Essay," p. 1245). Browning's exaggerated defensiveness when confronted

by Julia Wedgwood's accusations of subjectivity—she once accuses Browning of “lending [too] much of *yourself* to your contemptible characters”<sup>31</sup>—make sense in light of his own attempt to excuse what he sees as Shelley's greatest Romantic flaw, as well as the defining quality of the subjective poet: writing out of a state of mind (and Browning quotes Shelley directly here) “in which ideas may be supposed to assume the force of sensation, through the confusion of thought with the objects of thought, and excess of passion animating the creations of the imagination” (“Essay,” p. 1252). When Wedgwood thus identifies the same tendency in *The Ring and the Book*—“I shd have thought that very detachment of attention from sympathy wd have implied a filtering away of your own thoughts from your own representations, which is the very opposite of what I find with you”<sup>32</sup>—she aligns Browning with the Romantic impulse about which he was most anxious.

Browning's Romantic proclivities—as well as his critiques of Romanticism—show themselves most clearly in his earlier poetry, where he engages more overtly with the play between Romantic subjectivity and dramatic objectivity than he does in *The Ring and the Book*. Many of his dramatic monologues, particularly “Porphyria's Lover” and “My Last Duchess,” obsessed as they are with murdering, memorializing, and reanimating, dramatize the failure of the poet to preserve an objective distance from his aesthetic creation, attempting in their staging to critique but not to repudiate the structures of subjective poetry.<sup>33</sup> Other poems, like “Memorabilia,” which explicitly uses Shelley and his “To a Skylark” as antitheses to its speaker's poetic sensibility, endeavor to wholly disengage representation from subjectivity—to actually create the kind of pure “objective” poetry of which Browning's essay ultimately admits “there has yet been no instance” (“Essay,” p. 1245). In all three of these specific poems, a memorial object—a body, a painting, or a feather—becomes the locus for a crisis of subjectivity, although each poem memorializes, and thus registers the crisis, in different ways. “Porphyria's Lover” and “My Last Duchess” violently display the ethical and aesthetic repercussions of using language to bring the dead back to life; “Memorabilia,” in contrast, refuses to memorialize at all, but in the ramifications of its refusal reveals the same impossibility of categorically “pure” poetry as do the monologues that bask in poetry's impurity. While these poems come long before *The Ring and the Book*, they approach Browning's anxieties about aesthetics and Romanticism through the conceit of returning the dead to life, and in doing so provide a lens through which to read the later poem's obsession with reanimation as a fraught engagement with both poetic history and poetic possibility.

The objective poet, in Browning's essay, maintains the integrity of “the world” that the subjective poet necessarily destabilizes by integrating the world with his personality: “There may be no end of the poets who communicate to us what they see in an object with reference to their own individuality,”

he writes early in the essay, but “what it was before they saw it, in reference to the aggregate human mind, will be as desirable to know as ever” (“Essay,” p. 1245). Although the implicit self-referentiality of this comment suggests the dramatic monologue as the poetic form most proficient in divorcing itself from the poet’s “individuality,” at the same time the maniacal aesthetic projections of the narrators of monologues like “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” stage the violent impossibility of a poetry beyond subjectivity—the impossibility of a poetry in which a skylark really could be just “a little ball of feather and bone.”<sup>34</sup> Although Browning maintains an ironic distance from the speakers of these poems, the speakers’ aesthetic conceits nonetheless reflect a concern that the objectivity of dramatic projection—the speakers’ projections in the poems, and Browning’s own projections of the speakers—might be implicitly subjective, as well. In these monologues, Shelley’s skylark has been replaced with female corpses, but the psychopathy of the poems lies not in the corpses themselves but in poetry’s capacity, its need, to keep these corpses unnaturally alive, to reimagine Shelley’s “Divine” ecstasy as the most abject of poetic undertakings.<sup>35</sup>

The aberrant animation of these corpses by their lovers manifests the very problem that objective “dramatic poetry” should contravene (“Essay,” p. 1245): the contamination of the object, “the world,” by an infusion of individual subjectivity—the “pathetic fallacy” revamped for the modern necrophiliac—a phenomenon manifested to the utmost at the end of “Porphyria’s Lover”:

The smiling, rosy little head,  
So glad it has its utmost will,  
That all it scorned at once is fled,  
And I, its love, am gained instead!<sup>36</sup>

Objectivity and subjectivity crumble into one another when the poem’s narrator forces his own thoughts onto the corpse, for at the same moment in which he wholly objectifies Porphyria by transforming the corpse from a “she” to an “it,” he also breathes into it the deviant spark of (what Browning in a very different context would have to call) his own “inner light and power” by investing the dead body with a spirit beyond its own form (“Essay,” p. 1245). This animating move sounds rapturous in Browning’s Shelleyan terms, but the terms of his poem reveal its gleeful sadism: “And I untightened next the tress / About her neck; her cheek once more / Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss,” the narrator tells us, clearly delighting in his strangulation (ll. 46-48).

The narrator derives a sense of self, a self-conscious (and an uncertain) “I,” only from his creation of the corpse’s self-awareness—“No pain felt she; / *I am quite sure she felt no pain*” (ll. 42-43, italics mine)—and in this displacement and projection of subjectivity Browning implicates his own aesthetic project, and his doubts about that project, in the pathology the monologue

encapsulates. For, although the poet and the speaker of the poem are expressly distinct from one another, methodologically the speaker's projection of fictional subjectivity precisely mimics the poet's task of creating a fictional subjectivity in the dramatic monologue—the animated corpse becomes a grotesque amplification of the dramatic poem's forged poetic persona.<sup>37</sup> The subjectivity Browning fingers in Shelley as the ascendant potential to see "what God sees" is resurrected in "Porphyria's Lover" as the height of perversity ("Essay," p. 1244): a violent, unnatural, inauthentic literary construction, a living corpse. In this monologue, "subjectivity" constitutes not a pathway to the divine, but a profane poetic convention that refuses to let the dead stay dead, yet does not have the capacity to actually bring anything but artifice back to life.

"My Last Duchess," in contrast, has no dead body to revivify, but this monologue uses the aesthetic representation of the body as a substitute through which to renew the violent pleasure of subjection. "That's my last Duchess, painted on the wall," the Duke begins, recreating the once-woman as pure representation, a projection of his own aesthetic and narrative desires. The dead Duchess, voided of all subjectivity, embodies the culmination of his desire for control, a climactic moment, discrete and frozen ("I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" [ll. 45-46]). A singular satisfaction, however, will not suffice—the dead Duchess may be the climax of the story, but the Duchess "looking as if she were alive" far more potently enables the Duke's fantasy of her ongoing capitulation to his will and to his language: the continuous reanimation of her form with his subjectivity. The lines "Even had you skill / In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will / Quite clear to such an one" (ll. 35-37) equate the "speech" at hand with the violent way in which the Duke did make his will "quite clear," but the brutality, and the pleasure, of language lies in its imposition rather than its evacuation of subjectivity. The Duke's story of the Duchess reiterates the violence of his murder by resuscitating her in his own image—his language memorializes both his desire and her subjection.

As the poem's rhythm and prosody enmesh our own reading pleasure within the Duke's commingled murdering and memorializing instincts, it becomes increasingly clear that the aestheticization of violence displayed in the Duke's monologue has wider implications for poetry itself and the way it functions in its memorial capacity as an instrument of subjective violence. As Elisabeth Bronfen has written in her study of aesthetics and the female corpse, the violence of aestheticizing the dead body lies in its displacement of pain "onto a formal level"—the pain of a dying woman "is subordinated to notions of artistic ability and aesthetic effect" (p. 51). "My Last Duchess" (and "Porphyria's Lover," as well), deliberately and depravedly makes grotesque violence beautiful—its language colludes with its psychopathic narrator by creating a gorgeous, painted corpse, by aesthetically entering into a psychology that savors

memorialization as a constant re-enactment of death's initial violence. It does so in the ironic form of the dramatic monologue, however, which suggests that the pleasure the poem seems to take in this literary violence is not actually its primary interest. Rather, the poem's lovely brutality invites us to reflect upon the aesthetic and ethical quandary of binding together poetry and violence in the act of representation. To the extent that the portrait of the Duchess can be considered a stand-in for poetry as a whole, or more specifically for memorial poetry, "My Last Duchess" hyperbolically insists that the object of remembrance in the poem can never do more than look as if alive—anything beyond the bare outlines of its form must be the projections of the poet. The memorial poem becomes a performance of violence by draining and forcibly reconstructing the subjectivity of a silenced body. Yet as the poet enmeshes himself in the fictive reconstitution of this subjectivity, the memorial poem also comes to deny the distinction between poet and object that Browning in his Shelley essay so adamantly desires, although falls short of entirely achieving: memorial poetry will always be about its remembering poet.<sup>38</sup>

"Memorabilia," published more than a dozen years after "My Last Duchess," thus posits remembering as the fundamental opposition to objective poetry, and memory as a derisory rather than a formative phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> The poem begins by recording the poet's awe at meeting a man who had met Shelley, but quickly deflates the transformative value of the Shelley-encounter by showing the man's total lack of transformation: "But you were living before that. / And also you are living after" (ll. 5-8), the poet recognizes, expressing in the sing-song repetition of these lines an ironic acknowledgment that such value lies in poetic convention rather than in actuality—that the spiritual significance (or in this case, the lack of spiritual significance) of the moment of encounter exists only in the poet's literary revision of the moment. The only place where Browning's idea of "subjectivity" could ever come to fruition, these lines suggest, is in the memorial poem, by which I mean, quite literally here, the poem predicated on memory or commemoration. "Memorabilia" (as its title ironically implies) thus seamlessly transitions from a rejection of Shelleyan subjectivity in the first two stanzas into a rejection of memory itself in the stanzas that follow: "I crossed a moor, with a name of its own, / And a certain use in the world no doubt" (ll. 9-10), the poet tells us in the third stanza, perhaps alluding to and undermining the literary aura of Emily Brontë's famous landscape, but more importantly, reveling in forgetting it—forgetting the aura, the name of the moor, its use in the world, and even the near-ballad form of the preceding stanzas. Forgetting becomes the poem's means to objectivity, its method of setting up the potential for subjective Shelleyan poetry and then mercilessly, unambiguously, dismissing it:

For there I picked up on the heather  
And there I put inside my breast

A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!  
Well, I forget the rest. (ll. 13-16)

Parodying romantic ecstasy with the exclamation point in the third line, this final stanza shows that Shelley's "Divine" eye, with all its so-called power to turn a bird into a "blithe spirit," must first be enabled by literary memory; and the objective poet, therefore, must and does forget.

But in this willful forgetting, which allows a moor to remain a moor, and a feather, a feather, the poet cannot help but extinguish his own project—forgetting denies not only subjectivity, but the very possibility for poetry, and in this nihilistic gesture lies the crux of the anti-memorial poem. Poetry cannot cease remembering, and, in remembering, reanimating—language itself is a memorial phenomenon, each word, to borrow from Agamben, "a dead language handed down to us by the dead," and to forget is fundamentally to reject its signifying capacity.<sup>40</sup> Browning's notion of objective poetry in its most ideal form—"the fact itself" ("Essay," p. 1244)—negates not only subjectivity, but also its own linguistic condition as a medium through which the world can be "reverted to and relearned" ("Essay," p. 1245). "Memorabilia" thus finally belies any firm distinction between objective and subjective poetry theorized in Browning's essay, projecting in its "objective" self-annihilation a death beyond the reanimating reach of the memorial, a death of poetry itself.

#### IV. Reanimating the Renaissance

To wholly reject Romanticism, then, is to attempt a poetics that refuses to engage with, remember, or memorialize its past—a poetics that Browning clearly finds neither tenable nor desirable. *The Ring and the Book* rather offers a memorial poetics that interrogates the mechanisms by which we remember and that sees the process of remembrance as one inextricable both from revision and from invention: as a process of reanimation, with all of its contingent possibilities and limitations. Although Browning deliberated on the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, he had no illusions about the dead as a source of truth. However, as evidenced in *The Ring and The Book*, he credited the imaginative truth of his resuscitating art. The self-consciously subjective, necropoetic revision we see in the form of *The Ring and the Book*—its series of dramatic monologues, each of which revises the story told before—offers us a model for the way that poetry effectively can engage both with the past as a subject for art and with literary history as a fount of poetic method. The final book of *The Ring and the Book* returns to the metaphor of reanimation that the poet introduces in the first book, but this time uses it more explicitly to negotiate the relationship between historical truth, art, and memory. The book introduces the metaphor by attempting to make a distinction between "human testimony" and "Art" with a capital "A," ascribing truth to the lat-

ter and calling the former inherently false—yet, by pitting testimony and art against one another to conclude a poem that throughout renders the two fundamentally indistinguishable, the poet only draws attention to the impossibility of historical truth outside of subjective self-reflection. “There, would you disbelieve stern History / Trust rather to the babble of a bard?” (XII.804-805) the poet-narrator asks sardonically, then uses his image of reanimation to inflate the power of this “babble”:

So did this old woe fade from memory,  
Till after, in the fullness of the days,  
I needs must find an ember yet unquenched,  
And, breathing, blow the spark to flame. It lives. (XII.826-829)

More explicitly than in the first book, the resuscitative task of the poet here becomes one of generative remembering, salvaging what has been forgotten by breathing the dead back to life.

In this, the echoes of the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, famous for calling historiography an act of resurrection, are unmistakable, and we see Browning engaging not only with the history of literary influence, but with the ways in which his contemporaries conceived and wrote history itself. As Phillip Harwood wrote in an 1842 essay entitled “The Modern Art and Science of History,” modern historians aimed to “recreate worlds out of the loose, chaotic elements furnished by chroniclers and bards”<sup>41</sup> (a phrase that, like Browning’s appeal to galvanism, brings at least one Shelley specifically to mind): the historian’s primary desire, in the words of one critic, was to “to resuscitate the living reality from the dead facts.”<sup>42</sup> The historian Michelet, with whose “speculative thinking” the Brownings were familiar,<sup>43</sup> sets out this task most explicitly: “Yes, each dead man leaves a small property, his memory, and asks that it be cared for,” Michelet writes. “I have given many of the too-forgotten dead the assistance which I myself shall require. I have exhumed them for a second life. . . . [History] gives life to these dead men, resuscitates them.”<sup>44</sup>

Resurrection, in other words, for historians like Michelet or even Carlyle, was a task of excavatory truth, an effort of objectivity.<sup>45</sup> And while Browning seems to present the equivalent ideal for poetry in *The Ring and the Book*, which, as Hilary Fraser reminds us, aspires to “transform ‘dead truth’ into ‘live truth’” (p. 17), the poem in fact denies the validity of what Michelet sees as the natural extension, the ultimate goal, of this resuscitative ideal of history: the possibility that forgotten human voices, once resuscitated, can tell their true stories. Browning instead sees human testimony as the antithesis to the truth of art: “our human speech is naught, / Our human testimony false, our fame / And human estimation words and wind” (XII.834-836), the narrator says, before insisting that “Art remains the one way possible / Of speaking truth” (XII.839-840).



The contradictions in these few lines self-consciously encapsulate the generic irony inherent in the dramatic monologue. The lines first claim that the poet's art is an act both of memorialization and of resuscitation, implying that it can bring forgotten human voices back to life. They then deny that these human voices can speak truth. And finally, they argue that Art is the one avenue to truth. How are we to reconcile the truth of resuscitative art with the falsity of human testimony? The reconciliation lies in the irony of the dramatic monologue: "Why take the artistic way to prove so much?" the narrator asks, "so much" referring to the untrustworthiness of human testimony (XII.837). Because art, as he says, "speaks truth." But, in characterizing art as the means of speaking the truth of human falsity, Browning underscores the fissure between the aims of his art and the objective rendering of the human voice, between the subjective nature of the dramatic monologue and the fiction of a "dramatic poetry" that "speaks for itself" (in the words of the "Essay on Shelley"). This final book insists that truth lies beyond and between language—"between the lines," as Herbert Tucker would have it.<sup>46</sup> "Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word," the poet says in the poem's penultimate stanza (XII.855-857), pointing us explicitly to the imaginative rather than the conscriptive task of poetry, suggesting that art is a vehicle for subjective knowledge rather than an end in itself, and insisting that we recognize the ironic sensibility of the book as a whole. We are, after all, being instructed to glorify poetry's capacity to "miss the mediate word" and, thus, to appreciate the distance it creates between language and meaning.

To see, then, a direct parallel between the resuscitative historical sensibility of a historian like Michelet and Browning's poetic sensibility in *The Ring and the Book* would be to wholly ignore the ironic capacity built into the "resuscitative" form of the dramatic monologue that Browning chooses to use. Further, the ultimate aim of the resuscitative historian, to quote Roland Barthes on Michelet, is to reverse "Time, [to] turn back to the place of the dead and recommenc[e] their life in a clear and useful direction," to restore a life "fresh and virgin of death" (pp. 83-84)—death is the necessary condition of history, but also what history sets out to erase completely. Yet as Browning makes most clear in the first and final books of *The Ring and the Book*, resuscitative poetry will always be a memorial gesture, one that remembers and aestheticizes death rather than strives to eradicate it. In Book I, when the poet says "The life in me abolished the death of things," this resurrection of the past immediately metamorphoses into a theatrical metaphor, one used repeatedly throughout the poem, continuing with: "as then and there / Acted itself over again once more / The tragic piece" (I.520, 521-523). The life the poet raises before our eyes gleams with the dramatic artificiality suggested by the words "acted," "tragic," and "piece," and what we see most clearly is his

revivifying rhetorical power: the scene playing out through his literary eyes rather than an unmediated view of the past.<sup>47</sup> We see, in other words, the aesthetic process of reanimating what has been dead instead of the flawless substitution of life for death. We see what has been lost as much as what can be returned.

The poem registers an intense confusion between the remnants of the past out of which the poet makes his art, and the resulting art itself. “Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?” (l.706), the poet muses, drawing our attention to the malleability of both terms as well as grammatically destabilizing the distinction between life and death. If fact needs the life of fiction, or art, to make it live, then how could living art and dead fact be the same? The living art, grammatically as well as conceptually, always carries the dead past with it. When the poem returns to its metaphor of reanimation in its final book, this metaphor has been explicitly bound to memory, or to the absence of memory, as the passage that I already quoted demonstrates: “So did this old woe fade from memory, / Till after, in the fullness of the days, / I needs must find an ember yet unquenched.” The word “need” reminds us that the poet is bound by his mortal limitations: he does not have God’s power to create something out of nothing, and thus must always seek out the dead in order to reanimate it into art.

As Browning wrote exasperatedly to Wedgwood in response to her criticism of the poem, “Before I die, I hope to purely invent something,—here my pride was concerned to invent nothing.”<sup>48</sup> *The Ring and the Book* celebrates poetry as a historically contingent art, rather than one originating beyond the bounds either of the past or of literary tradition. At the same time, however, Browning uses the metaphor of reanimation to resist any teleological model that would place him in an uncomplicated or unbroken timeline with his poetic history—necropoetics require death, a rupture in time, in order to bring anything back to life. By compulsively reanimating a story of death, the poem insistently demonstrates that art does indeed make itself out of the bones of the past. These lines—“I needs must find an ember yet unquenched, / And, breathing, blow the spark to flame”—in which life can only spark if there is a dead memory to flame to life, not only make reanimation a fundamentally memorial act, contingent on the passage of time, the loss of a story, and the death of its actors, but also turn our attention to the poet’s aesthetic “need” to materially remember—not to mourn what is lost, but to make a work of art by scavenging among the remnants of the lost, reanimating them in his own poetic image.

## Notes

- 1 Review of *The Ring and the Book*, *The Times* (Friday, June 11, 1869): 4.
- 2 William Allingham, January 2, 1872. This characterization follows Allingham's complaint to Thomas Carlyle that Browning "had neither given us the real story as he found it, nor, on the other hand, constructed a poem out of it" (*William Allingham's Diary*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson [Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1967], pp. 207-208); Review of *The Ring and the Book* in *St. Paul's Magazine* 7 (January 1871): 397; Review of *The Ring and the Book* in *Fortnightly Review* 5, no. 25 (January 1869): 125.
- 3 Carlyle made this comment to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who himself said of the poem's "incoherence" that "the thing that makes Browning drunk is to give him a dram of prosaic reality, and unluckily this time the 'gum-tickler' is less like pure Cognac than 7 Dials gin" (see *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 1854-1870* [London, 1897], p. 284); Browning, "Introductory Essay [Essay on Shelley]," in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), pp. 1243, 1244. Subsequently cited parenthetically in the text as "Essay."
- 4 Adam Roberts, "Browning, the Dramatic Monologue, and the Resuscitation of the Dead," *The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. Nicola Brown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), p. 109.
- 5 Quoted in Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), p. 29.
- 6 *The Ring and the Book*, (l.719, 713, 733). All quotations follow the text printed in *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard Altick (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), and are subsequently cited in the text by book and line number.
- 7 The importance of necromancy and corpses to Browning's work has been noted by several critics—see especially Roberts, pp. 109-127; Jochen Haug, *Passions Without a Tongue: Dramatisations of the Body in Robert Browning's Poetry* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004); and Carol Christ, "Browning's Corpses" (*VP* 33, nos. 3-4 [1995]: 391-401). See also the chapter on Browning in Elisabeth Bronfen's book, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 8 The relationship between Browning and nineteenth-century historicism has been addressed by Herbert Tucker in "Wanted Dead or Alive: Browning's Historicism" (*Victorian Studies* 38, no. 1 [Autumn, 1994]: 25-39). See also Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1985) and Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), particularly chapter three, "Michelet: Historical Realism as Romance."
- 9 Roberts, pp. 113, 121. Frances O'Gorman has more recently suggested that the "notion that the presences of the lost inhabited the environment in which Browning lived . . . was a conception he found of allure in figuring the work of the dramatic monologue," but that rather than mourning these departed, poems like *The Ring and the Book* avoid mourning altogether. Instead, he argues, Browning's revivalist verse pushes grief offstage, attempting "to keep out of sight the fact that what was obtained was always and permanently lost, even in the act of being 'recalled'" (Frances O'Gorman, "Browning, Grief, and the Strangeness of Dramatic Verse," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36, no. 2 [2007]: 156, 170).
- 10 Browning's friend Alexandra Orr suggests this quite eloquently when she discusses *The Ring and the Book* in her *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (new ed., rev. Frederic G.

- Kenyon [Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1974]), "We cannot read the emotional passages of *The Ring and the Book* without hearing in them a voice which is not Mr. Browning's own: an echo, not of his past, but from it. The remembrance of that past must have accompanied him through every stage of the great work. . . . Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence on this occasion was more than a presiding memory of the heart" (p. 270).
- 11 The ring in the title of the poem refers both to a ring of Elizabeth's that Browning wore on a chain after her death, and to a tablet above the front door of Casa Guidi, the Brownings' home in Florence, inscribed by Niccolò Tommaseo, who wrote that Elizabeth "had made with her verse a golden ring between Italy and England." This inscription is translated in the last lines of *The Ring and the Book*: "Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised) / Linking our England to his Italy!" (XII.869-870).
  - 12 Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mrs. Julia Martin, October 2[2], 1846 (*The Browning's Correspondence*, ed. Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis [Winfield, Kansas: Wedgestone Press, c. 1984], 14:35, 30, 31); hereafter cited as BC.
  - 13 November 19, 1862, *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden*, ed. Edward C. McAleer (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1951), p. 134.
  - 14 February 1, 1869, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed by Their Letters*, ed. Richard Curle (New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1937), p. 162. Subsequently cited as *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*.
  - 15 Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, February. 13, 1846, BC, 12:70.
  - 16 January 21, 1869, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p. 154; Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), p. 97.
  - 17 November 15, 1868; December 3, 1868; *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, pp. 137, 150.
  - 18 Elizabeth best expressed this displeasure with funerals to her friend Mary Russell Mitford in 1854: "Now you will understand at once what ghastly flakes of death have changed the sense of Rome to me! . . . I am horribly weak about such things—I can't look on the earth-side of death—I flinch from corpses and graves, and never meet a common funeral without a sort of horror. When I look deathwards I look over death, and upwards, or I can't look any way at all" (January. 7, 1854, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic Kenyon, 2 vols. [London: Macmillan and Co., 1898], 2:153-154).
  - 19 January 21, 1869, November 19, 1868, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, pp. 154, 143.
  - 20 The Brownings' courtship correspondence is peppered with references to critical notes and suggestions that Elizabeth made for Browning's work, as well as with his appreciation for and acceptance of her sensibility. "You would let me now, I dare say, call myself grateful to you," he wrote in July 1845, for instance: "all the suggestions are to be adopted, the improvements accepted: I so thoroughly understand your spirit in this, that, just in this beginning, I should really like to have found some point in which I could cooperate with your intention, and help my work by disputing the effect of any alteration proposed, if it ought to be disputed . . . but this time I cannot dispute one point—All is for the best" (July 25, 1845, BC, 11:2-3). For further examples, see letters throughout the second half of 1845, particularly those dated August 3, August 12, September 24, and October 29. In the last of these, Browning even expresses his "unsatisfaction" and "shame" at poems "written before [Elizabeth's] time," i.e., before

- her critical influence (11:146).
- 21 V.223-227. Quotations from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
  - 22 Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 116.
  - 23 The "Tennyson and Browning" chapter of George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 3:183-240, mentions *The Ring and the Book* only twice: once, quoting a line from it amid other blank verse lines of "perfectly sound and satisfactory equivalence" (3:219), and once towards the end of the chapter, only to tell us that "no more need to be said of the blank verse of [Browning's] later days from *The Ring and the Book* onward" (3:236).
  - 24 Browning was undoubtedly familiar with both Shelleys' interest in theories of galvanic energy, particularly those of the experimental chemist Humphry Davy, to whose rhetoric one could easily attribute the energy and language of Book I of the *The Ring and the Book*: "Science . . . has bestowed upon [man] powers which may be called creative; which have enabled him to modify and change the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments" (quoted in the Introduction to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985], p. xxx).
  - 25 See especially Neville-Sington, pp. 146-157; John Woolford, "The Romantic Brownings," *Studies in Browning and his Circle* 24 (June 2001): 7-30; "Browning Rethinks Romanticism," *Essays in Criticism* 43, no. 3 (July 1993): 211-227; U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Projection and the Female Other: Romanticism, Browning, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *VP* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 139-159; and Harold Bloom, "Browning: Good Moments and Ruined Quests," in *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 175-204.
  - 26 Knoepfelmacher, p. 144, quoting Robert Langbaum's *Poetry of Experience*.
  - 27 Britta Martens, "'Knight, Bard, Gallant': The Troubadour as a Critique of Romanticism in Browning's *Sordello*," in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Loretta M. Holloway and Jennifer A. Palmgren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 39.
  - 28 The objective poet writes "what we call dramatic poetry," poetry that "speaks for itself, as we say" ("Essay on Shelley," pp. 1245, 1244)—almost literally so, in the case of the dramatic monologue.
  - 29 November 19, 1868, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p. 144.
  - 30 Browning admits that "of the perfect shield, with the gold and silver side set up for all comers to challenge, there has yet been no instance"; in other words, that a wholly pure version either of the subjective poet or of the objective poet has yet to be seen ("Essay on Shelley," p. 1245). He goes on to describe the cyclicity of subjective and objective poetry, describing the former rising until "the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality" and in need of the latter to supply a "fresh and living swathe." This tendency toward objectivity will then endure until "its very sufficiency to itself shall require, at length, an exposition of its affinity to something higher," when it will give way to subjectivity and begin the cycle again (p. 1246).
  - 31 January 30, 1869, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p. 159.
  - 32 January 30, 1869, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p. 157.

- 33 See Knoepfelmacher in "Projection and the Female Other" which contends that "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" represent Browning's ironic "animations of a process of [Romantic] deanimation" by which a "devouring male ego reduces the Female Other to nothingness" (p. 151).
- 34 From Hardy's "Shelley's Skylark," l. 10, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1:133.
- 35 See Diana Fuss, "Corpse Poem," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Autumn 2003): 1-30: "Giving voice to the voiceless cadaver, corpse poems bring language more fully in line with death; they are literary fictions that seek to revivify and reauthorize the dead, at the risk of contaminating and killing poetry" (p. 1).
- 36 Ll. 52-55; all quotations from "Porphyria's Lover," "My Last Duchess," and "Memorabilia" are from *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas Collins, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).
- 37 I use the word "forgery" deliberately here to invoke C. D. Blanton's article, "Impostures: Robert Browning and the Poetics of Forgery," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 1-25.
- 38 See Fuss's discussion (p. 22) of the differences between the speaking corpse poem and the elegy.
- 39 "And the memory I started at—  
My starting moves your laughter." (ll. 7-8)
- 40 Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), p. 74.
- 41 Phillip Harwood, "The Art and Science of History," *Westminster Review* 38 (October 1842): 353.
- 42 Jann, p. xiii. See also *The Study of the Past in the Victorian Age*, ed. Vanessa Brand (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1998), and Peter Allen Dale, *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977).
- 43 The Brownings were in Paris during the 1850s when Michelet was stripped of his place at the Collège de France (for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to Napoleon III) and were clearly familiar with his work. As Elizabeth writes of the scandal in an 1852 letter to Mary Russell Mitford, "Victor Cousin and Villemain refuse to take the oath, and lose their situations in the Academy accordingly; but they retire on pensions, and it's their own fault of course. Michelet and Quinet should have an equivalent, I think, for what they have lost; they are worthy, as poets, orators, dreamers, speculative thinkers—as anything, in fact, but instructors of youth" (May 9, 1852, *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1:70-71).
- 44 Quoted in Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), pp. 101-102.
- 45 See Hilary Fraser, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1992).
- 46 Herbert Tucker, "The Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric," in *Lyric Poetry Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chavia Hosek, Patricia Parker, and Jonathan Arac (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 231.
- 47 These lines are obsessively first-person: "I saw with my own eyes / In Florence as I trod the terrace, breathed / The beauty and the fearfulness of the night" (l.523-525).
- 48 November 19, 1868, *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood*, p. 144.