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Browning, Donne, and the Triangulation of the Dramatic Monologue

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The starting point, I am afraid, still has to be Eliot's famous dicta over Donne and the Victorians: "Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. . . . Tennyson and Browning ruminated." That can hardly be true in any literal way for Browning because Browning—at least the Browning through *The Ring and the Book* that we know as a standard writer—never ruminates: he makes some other voice, not his own, do whatever is done. What those voices do, certainly by comparison to Tennyson's speakers (as Robert Langbaum pointed out long ago), is argue: with their audience or people in their world, with writers before them, with God, above all, with themselves. What is surprising, in fact, is how little Browning's characters ruminate, as opposed to attempting to amalgamate disparate experience in forceful argument. Ruminate has something perjorative about it, like poetic cud chewing; but it does capture the flavor of a great deal of poetry from, say, Gray through the Georgians of the time when Eliot first appears on the scene: reflective, deeply felt with not infrequent sighs, filled with images that bring largely emotional rather than intellectual content into the poem, thoughts brought in extraneously or as afterthoughts that stick out from the texture of the poetry itself. A wonderful tradition that taught us how to feel, even how to imagine, but perhaps lost the line of argument in the process. In this view of modern poetry Browning is egregious—far more indeed than the deep-feeling Eliot with his panoply of imagistic structures sighing out modern man's alienation and hopes of redemption—for retaining a main line of argument and thinking in poetry.

Browning's interest in argument, in the uses and abuses of logical thinking in poetry, suggests affinities with poetic traditions other than the Romantic, Shelleyan one, with which he is most easily identified by the style and complicated stationing of himself in relation to Shelley in his

first published work, *Pauline*. In part, we can identify him generally with the grandfathers of the Victorians, the eighteenth-century poets of thought in verse: certainly this dying but not quite dead tradition was the one offered him by his learned and sometimes versifying father. But in the works of his father that have survived, as in so much serious verse of the eighteenth century, we have literally ideas in verse, Eliot's thinking as ruminations, but not a sense of a mind hard at work thinking through poetry. For that the obvious antecedent is in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Elizabethan drama, in Shakespeare himself, and above all in Eliot's own model for thinking in poetry, John Donne.

We know that Browning benefited from the revival of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama by writers such as Coleridge, Lamb, or Hazlitt in the period just before him. For a while he was cast by his contemporaries, most notably the actor-director Macready, as the man who would revive serious verse drama for the Victorian stage. And Browning's mediocre dramas are filled with the compulsive thinking in poetry, if not the convulsive stage action, of the earlier English drama. But Browning's closest affinity as a writer of thinking in poetry, in poems that enact the process of the reasoning, rationalizing, even sometimes casuistic mind at work, is doubtless to be found in the strong lines of Donne and his tradition. Browning knew Herbert and Cowley but his favorite seventeenth-century writer was Donne himself, and there is every reason to look in Donne for an important influence on a rather idiosyncratic development in nineteenth-century poetry and for certain parallels in poetic procedure. I will suggest some of the specific ways Donne's work has affinities with Browning's and probably created a special influence on Browning's development—a subject in the history of Donne's tradition interesting in itself because of Browning's stature as a poet and also interesting because Browning's idiosyncratic redeployment of some of Donne's qualities in the nineteenth century anticipates the development of a far more central Donne tradition in the twentieth century. Browning's relatively great importance for poets of the Transition and Early Modern period (one thinks of the specifically Browningesque work of Pound or Frost but also of the competitive development of inner monologue in Eliot or even in Stevens) indeed makes this a central line in the re-emergence of a Donne tradition in modern poetry. Probably many poets of the earlier modern period whom we think of in relation to Donne are as much in the tradition of Donne mediated by Browning as they are directly influenced by Donne himself.

Browning's interest in and special relation to Donne has long been recognized by Browning's biographers; it was the subject of an excellent essay by Joseph E. Duncan in the 1950s.[1] Browning was sufficiently

identified as a friend to Donne's poetry in the nineteenth century to be the modern to whom Alexander Grosart dedicated his edition of Donne in 1872: in effect, as Donne's literary patron before the time of Eliot. Browning took on Donne as a personal favorite in the way he adopted other interesting, if somewhat obscured, figures of the past, Mandeville or Christopher Smart. Elizabeth Barrett speaks to Browning of the great seventeenth-century poet as a personal possession, "your Dr. Donne" or "your Donne."[2] Unlike many of Browning's passions and possessions in his out-of-the-way reading, Donne was clearly more than just a quirky choice that attracted him for some one work or quality. If Donne had not the importance in Browning's time that he has had for us in the twentieth century, he was also not merely a personal choice. Browning inherited a tradition of taking Donne seriously as a writer that was far stronger than the usual talk of a revival of Donne in the twentieth century would imply. Johnson's famous "Life of Cowley," for all its criticism of Donne, accords him an important place as a figure in English literature and even offers rather high praise of Donne's learning and ingenuity. Donne was republished in the eighteenth century, for instance in a sympathetic edition, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1719), given to Browning by a one-time friend, an edition which included Walton's eulogistic "Life," or in a *Poetical Works of Dr. John Donne* (London and Edinburgh, 1779), in Bell's Poets of Great Britain, which has Browning's signature and numerous annotations and underlinings.[3] Donne was also included in a number of other anthologies or series of English poets that a young poet such as Browning or an old scholar such as his father might readily have known.[4] As important for the immediate heir to the Romantics, Donne was anything but ignored by them; Coleridge, especially, but also Lamb, De Quincey, Landor, and Hazlitt had taken notice of Donne, only Hazlitt unfavorably.

Browning's own reading in Donne began early and apparently continued through his formative years. Even before he went to the London University he set to music the "Song: goe, and catche a falling starre."[5] As with most modern readers, this much the most accessible work of Donne's, much underlined in Browning's copy of *The Poetical Works*, must have been a solid possession for life. However, Browning clearly moved on to the thornier pastures in Donne's complete works during his early manhood and early poetic career in the 1830s. There is every reason to believe that he put in the effort to study Donne's difficult works adequately. Browning even recalled a delirious period in a sickness in 1834 when he imagined that he had to "go through a complete version of the Psalms by Donne, Psalm by Psalm!"[6] If the attribution of authorship of imaginary Psalms to Donne was also a product of delirium, the

fact that Browning's nightmares centered on Donne suggests how immersed he was in the earlier writer and how potent his influence was on him. Browning came to know—and in these cases came to know with pleasure—a very wide selection of Donne's poetry. He shows an acquaintance not only with well-known classics such as "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" but also with the "Epithalamion" (1613) and with poems from the *Elegies*, the *Verse Letters*, and the *Epicedes and Obsequies*.[7] Browning's enjoyment of Donne even extended rather beyond that of most modern admirers or scholars, even to the notoriously obscure work, the bitter unfinished satire, *The Progresse of the Soule* (written 1601). He refers to it early and late, in a prose piece of 1835 that I will want to look at in more detail and in his own period of notorious obscurity, the 1870s, in *The Two Poets of Croisic*.[8]

In his saturation in Donne, which went side by side with his absorption in the great works of the Romantics, Browning showed a remarkable ability to pick up the tone and poetic approach of an age whose values he could not ingest. In this reading of a great predecessor of a radically different age, Browning is already the fine and sympathetic cultural historian that he shows himself in so many of his master works. Unlike T. S. Eliot, he did not hope to revive the religious belief of a different time. He could not march to the special tune of the earlier poet, "reverend and magisterial" though he could find him. The certitude that a relation between heaven and earth could be found, the conviction that the world could be understood in the terms of religion if the exploration were pushed deeply enough, these assurances that underlie even the most agonized fleshly or spiritual struggles in Donne, were acknowledged but not assimilated by Browning. The troubled but still ultimately unified picture of the world of nature and religion that permitted Donne in a poem such as "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" to try to unite love and death, religious, spiritual union and sexual consummation by the metaphor of a compass was not one that could be revived by a nineteenth-century poet of Browning's outlook, however much he might wish to. When Browning, very likely following Donne, would attempt a similarly elaborate image, as in the ring metaphor of *The Ring and the Book* or the prismatic image of "Numpholeptos," the result was not necessarily inferior to Donne but it was something different. Instead of bringing his explorations to a static, unifying conclusion on which meditation could dwell, a long conceit would lead Browning only more deeply into the uncertainties and irresolutions of his ultimate vision of the nature of things.

Of course Donne himself attained moments of what Eliot called unified sensibility only on rather rare occasions in his work; as often, he

too labors toward meaning, works up argument on argument as a character in a Browning monologue bent on making his case or intent on a special pleading (perhaps why Eliot eventually went back before Donne to Dante for a truly unified mind). This central element in Donne of argumentation seems to have attracted Browning strongly and early in his reading of Donne. As he read Donne carefully in the 1830s, Browning found a poetry that welcomed logic, argument, and the use of reason as well as feeling into a poem. Argument was not a foreign, discursive element imposed upon the more "poetic" qualities of the poem. It was a distinct and important pleasure in itself, a major part of the art. Focus on argument—even the casuistry for which both Donne and Browning have been blamed—was not a flaw but a kind of extended figure of speech, one other aspect of a poem in which the poet could please by his extravagant skill. The nineteenth-century poet who actually took pleasure in the knotty argument posing of *The Progresse of the Soule* found in Donne that argument provided the backbone of most of his poems and he eventually organized most of his major dramatic monologues around argument.

There is rather good evidence that as he read or re-read Donne, Browning swerved toward Donne's example, after the fiasco of his imitation of Shelley and the Romantics generally in *Pauline*. It seems almost a case of a poet looking back to a grandfather in poetry as an alternative when the influence of a father figure in the immediately preceding generation becomes too oppressive. After the publication of the vague, confessional, and often turgid *Pauline* in 1833 and two minor impressionistic and emotive lyrics, his next publication was a little-known prose piece, "Some Strictures on a Late Article in the 'Trifler,' in a Letter to the Author Thereof," that appeared in a kind of amateur magazine, *The Trifler*, published by Browning's youthful friends.[9] Unimportant as a work of literature by Browning, it is significant of the opposing force of reading in non-Romantic literature, especially Donne, in Browning's development after *Pauline*. To judge from the date he entered in his annotated and much marked copy of *Poetical Works of Dr. John Donne*, Browning had apparently been reading Donne extensively after 1834. The importance of Donne to his writing at this time and to the *Trifler* article is inscribed in the opening quote: "Naturally at a new author I doubt, and stick, and do not say quickly, Good: I censure much and tax," which is from Donne's "Epistle" to *The Progresse of the Soule*. More important, Browning takes even his subject, the many possible plays upon the different senses of debt, and more important still, his tone from Donne: as in both the prose "Epistle" and the *Paradoxes and Problems* of Donne, Browning uses a pithy, resolutely intellectual and

argumentative style. To the poor writer of an earlier prudential and Philistine "Essay on Debt" he answers with an astounding fanfaronade of paradoxical proofs of men's numerous debts, to other men, to nature, to God. Despite its immaturity, the work is not unlike Donne in the sense it gives us of a strong mind working up and down a scale of correspondences and intellectual similarities. And, above all, it picks up Donne's special tone of writing emerging directly from a mind at work, whether in forceful case-making or deliberate meditation:

> For to be a man is to be a debtor: —hinting but slightly at the grand and primeval debt implied in the idea of creation, as matter too hard for ears like thine. . . . I must, nevertheless, remind thee that all moralists have concurred in considering this our mortal sojourn as indeed an uninterrupted state of debt, and the world our dwelling-place as represented by nothing so aptly as an inn, wherein those who lodge most commodiously have in perspective a proportionate score to reduce, and those who fare least delicately, but an insignificant shot to discharge.

It would be excessive to argue that reading Donne created the new Browning of the dramatic monologues. Indeed, Browning goes on in the essay itself to quote Quarles, Swift, and Mandeville, other writers who would appeal to a writer looking for a more argumentative and intellectual line than that offered by his Romantic heritage. And, of course, the greatest English creator of character, Shakespeare himself, who is also a great creator of argument in poetry, is always the major alternative to Shelley in Browning's mind. But his careful reading of Donne was at least a major force in helping Browning to the new poetry of argument and case-making that finds its best realization in the dramatic monologues.

The place of argument as a main line of organization in Browning's major work is apparent enough. One could look at the many cases, beginning with "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," probably composed in the same year as the "Strictures," through "My Last Duchess" and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," and on to the Pope of *The Ring and the Book*, where Browning chose Renaissance or seventeenth-century characters for his monologues, often indeed churchmen of one sort or another. None sounds like Donne himself; yet each poem shows an awareness of the centrality of argument in the earlier age; and each is a central, not idiosyncratic, poem of Browning's, as if the setting offered especially good opportunities for exercise of his use of argument in

poetry. Or, as another central example, we could look at Browning's poems on religion and even feel a general influence of Donne on Browning's own difficult poems of direct religious discourse. Browning follows Donne's approach to religious truth, even as he must make his quest the much more open-ended, doubt-filled one of the nineteenth-century religious liberal. He that would come to truth "about must, and about must goe" and Browning veers and tacks, moving from strongly presented argument to argument as he makes his quest, rather than, as most nineteenth-century writers, from emotion to emotion, image to image. *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* literally tries on different approaches to religious truth. "A Death in the Desert" and the "Epilogue" to *Dramatis Personae*, dealing with a nineteenth-century consciousness of historical distance from Christian dogma that Donne never fully faced despite his occasional uneasiness at the conclusions of the new scientific philosophy of his day, nonetheless approaches contemporary issues in Donne's sinewy intellectual style. Browning wrestles with knotty problems of textual interpretation or literally thrashes and kicks his way through the difficult element, the ocean and waves of our confused mortal existence, in order to arrive at some religious truth that will suffice for himself and his age.

Browning of course does not assume the religious faith of Donne, nor are his subjects mostly those of Donne. Studies of the artist, studies of cases of dramatic moral choice, studies of human nature under varying historical situations—in his treatment of these and many other familiar topics Browning has far more in common with his age than with the Donne whose work he so much appreciated. The influence and similarity is one of manner more than matter. And it is more a general approach to writing poetry than deliberate parody or verbal echoes. Stanzas five and six of "Childe Roland" beautifully chime after the beginning four lines of "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," so much so that it would be hard not to imagine that Browning heard Donne's lines somewhere in his memory as he wrote the poem. Yet this is a happy accident rather than an essential of the kind of influence Donne's work exerted on Browning's. When Browning speaks most approvingly of Donne it is his sense of form, his feeling for the way good writing works, that he stresses. He writes to Elizabeth of good art as a matter of the form enwrapping "the thought as Donne says 'an amber drop enwraps a bee.'"[10] In a number of ways Browning probably found in Donne during the critical and formative 1830s when he was reading him most closely not only a new line of organization but an entire alternative formal tradition of poetry. Here, too, Browning's "modernism" among Victorian poets can be described as his unusual preference for qualities of the school of Donne over the school of Shelley or Keats.

Browning found that Donne, like any good advocate, asserted the freedom to build his argument out of the materials and language that seemed most fitting to his purpose. As Donne's modernist apologists have told us so many times, he had no preordained poetic diction or rhythms, no set style that placed poetry in a different realm of sound from the varieties of spoken language. He had no preconceptions about the appropriate subjects for poetry that separated it from the ordinary concerns of men. His strong, colloquial language—"Busie old foole, unruly Sunne," "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love," "Batter my heart, three person'd God"—carried into complex poetic discourse the force and feeling of spoken English. Donne's similar ability to retain low subjects with high, to bring into poetry the mixed texture of everyday life, much as Elizabethan drama mixed high scenes and low scenes, upper classes and low, offered to Browning a model of a literature of dialogue rather than monologue (or of dialogue created by a world full of monologuists presented all together). Browning, who had trouble accepting the ironic mixing of different levels of perception in Byron, could find in Donne a more attractive sense of diversity as an entry into the mystery in the deeper relations of things. Rather than looking for a specialized syntax for poetry, Donne also delighted in the vast realms of English vocabulary. He could revel in the deliberate awkwardness of erudite words or the universal Elizabethan custom of punning carried to a new extreme. He made unending experiments with meter and rhythm, everywhere adapting the form to the needs of the statement rather than the outward form of convention, form enwrapping thought like that amber-drop about the bee.

All of these central qualities in Donne are central in Browning as well, most especially the use of a strong spoken language—"I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave"; "my first thought was, he lied in every word"; "Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat, / The mist in my face"—the ability to create a mixed world of highly diverse levels of experience, in Browning a world projected out into a great throng of all kinds of men and women, and a love of verbal and syntactic oddity and experimentation. In this last respect, the line of Donne, Browning, and Thomas Hardy suggests a particular route into modernism as a tradition of unpoetic, even crabbed or cranky erudite language, put to poetic work.

Such qualities in Browning indicate some of the ways reading in Donne may have been instrumental in suggesting new directions to a poet overshadowed by the immediately preceding Romantic tradition he knew so well from such an early age. In creating a new kind of poetry, Browning may not have consciously seen himself as Donne's disciple, and in any case Shelley and Shakespeare would be the two masters he

would first call up. But the common qualities in both Donne and Browning's work, despite the obvious two-hundred-year gap in sensibility, indicate a formative influence and something of a common tradition. In conclusion I want to raise a broader, less easily contained, question of affinity. This has to do with the old and vexed question of Browning's hallmark form, the dramatic monologue. Much of Donne, even some of the Donne Browning especially liked, is not in forms close to the dramatic monologue. But other poems of Donne tease comparison because they seem to be almost the clearest important antecedents of Browning's poems that capture some of the spirit of drama in little of the dramatic monologue. Robert Langbaum has already released us from the largely unproductive concern of earlier students of the dramatic monologue with formal characteristics—a listener, a specific setting, a temporal situation, a dramatic interplay between speaker and listener, and the rest—that actually fit few of Browning's best monologues. Such pedantry about form has yielded to Langbaum's idea of a modern poetry that makes the process of experience itself its subject. And if this is acceptable as a way of talking about the spirit of Browning's invention, then what predecessor gives us more of the sense of the immediate process of life in the making than Donne in his best monologues—poems also especially popular with modern readers.

Are they dramatic? I mean poems like "The Sunne Rising," "The Good-Morrow," "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," "The Relique," "The Anniversarie," "A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day," or even "The Flea." In a formal sense, I imagine, the answer is no. We need not imagine any speaker other than the poet himself, at least the Jack self of a poet admittedly possessed of a cast of selves, but not a dramatis personae, not "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." On the other hand, are they dramatic in effect? Do they present the speaker as a character before us? Do they involve us in a moment of drama itself, where something is being expressed between people that is going on in the act of speaking? Above all, do they sound *spoken*, as opposed to sung or chanted, intoned or sighed? Clearly, the answer is yes: these are monologues, dramatic in effect.

If there is not the nineteenth-century historicizing and particularizing that create especial dramatic definition of a speaker in the Browning monologue, there is in these poems by Donne the same strong sense of a speaker finding self-definition as he enacts a moment of drama before us. Recent work on Browning, following a general reader-response interest but not in touch with the specific critical approach, really approaches, suggested by that term, have focused on the dramatic relation between the speaker and the listener in the poem as audience.[11]

Because the listener is usually vaguely characterized in Donne's poems, this approach would seem to suggest a radical difference between the way in which a Donne monologue and a Browning dramatic monologue works. On the other hand, the presence of so many poems by Browning that we think of as dramatic monologues but which do not have specific listeners, should give us pause. These poems, sometimes patronizingly relegated by formalists of the dramatic monologue to a class of "imperfect" monologues or called soliloquies (as Browning once did, but generally did not), still seem recognizably to function in the mode of the Browning canon of dramatic monologues as a whole.

My temptation is to say that Donne's monologues, whatever their imperfections as formal dramatic monologues, offered a final great gift to Browning: a sense of the potential for creating exciting poems of minds at work in dramatic situations, poems that would naturally draw upon the strength of everyday speech rather than be lost in the desiccated poetic discourse of a worn romantic tradition in the 1830s. The proper focus in uncovering this community of form in Donne and Browning should be not on differences of audience in the poems but on the audience of the poem: the reader. If we borrow the recent interest in defining a normative reader's response to the dramatic monologue, we should speak not of a dramatic situation, as we do, but of a dramatic triangulation: a complicated interplay between speaker, the listener in the poem (who may be vaguely realized, as in Donne, or even not there at all, as in much of Browning), and the reader.

Even when the audience is not present, the reader of a monologue is peculiarly aware that his business in this kind of literature is with overhearing rather than direct reading or listening. We read a dramatic monologue by reading its likely effect on another person also part of our read, the listener; or we read a monologue without a listener by apprehending the special reasons for solo utterance: a man grieves over his lost love, a proto-man dares for a moment to give voice to his inductive theology. It would be quite different if we were reading a song of grief, with which we could sing along in our hearts, or were examining a theological treatise signed Calibanus and addressed to us in persuasive, if rough, rhetoric. Because we overhear such monologues, there is a way in which we credit their authenticity: "The Sunne Rising" or "Two in the Campagna" seem to give us privileged places in scenes of great intimacy: more important, they let us create an experience, as we read, of what another has in his heart that comes out at such rare moments of opening up of personality. Not that sincerity is always the mode: the Browning monologue may show us someone with a palpable design on his or her

listener; but at least he or she therefore has no design on us, the overhearers.

The form of dramatized poem, which Donne developed so vigorously and Browning exploited so comprehensively, thus involves the reader easily and actively just because it appears to make no immediate claims or assaults on the reader as overhearer (though occasionally Donne does bring the reader, especially a future reader, in as a figure in a poem). It allows for very intimate or soul-revealing statement while keeping the language dramatic and colloquial—a decided advantage to both Donne and Browning, whose problem was not in finding complex things to say about the meaning of life but in keeping the discourse at a level where others could understand it. When both moved away from the dramatic monologue form they moved into a splendid but palpable obscurity. Perhaps most important is the dynamic created by the special role of the reader as overhearer, alike in Donne's more dramatic lyrics and in Browning's dramatic monologues. Because of his initial uncertain relation to the speaker the reader is driven to create a position for himself as listener. Langbaum suggested this in his concept of sympathy and judgment, really the reader as sympathetic overhearer or as judgmental overhearer. The situation is generally far more complex, with the reader forced to choose between a variety of rather specific roles. In this process, the listener in the poem, the second point of the triangle, offers not a fixed reference point but an unsettling vantage point, which can attract the overhearer, repel him, or set him off in a complicated arc as he seeks a listener position where he can be comfortable. The activity thus created in the reader provides much of the excitement in the experience of a dramatic poem and directs the process of interpretation as a dialectical one, in which viewpoint leads to interpretation which in turn may lead to a repositioning of the viewpoint.

Let me give some examples, which will also serve to show that the same kind of dynamic in the reader as overhearer is generated in both Donne and Browning. "The Sunne Rising" is perhaps the clearest case in Donne if not necessarily the most interesting, just because Donne comes in this well-known poem as close as he ever does to a fully dramatized scene. That is, as in a Browning poem, we can eventually imagine a room, here the lover's bedroom, a listener, the lover, and the historical world around them—which Donne provides as concretely as Browning would, with its windows and curtains, its late school boys and sour apprentices, though it lacks Browning's historical consciousness. The listener to whom the rhetoric of the poem directs us is, of course, a hypothetical one: the sun personified as a busy person of the world. As

we overhear and come to understand the idea of mere worldliness this hypothetical listener comes to represent, with its ordered but meaningless activity, we strive to dissociate ourselves from *that* listener. We thus as readers parallel the process of the speaker's rhetoric, which is to dismiss the world and assert an opposing set of values of love and intimacy and exclusion. Rejecting identification with the hypothetical listener, we are thus moved toward the position of the listener in the poem, the lover entertained by this address. As the speaker begins to create this "real" listener for us in the second stanza, we are receptive to sharing her presumed outlook: admiration of his witty compliments and eloquent arrogance, seduction by the values of sexual intimacy he asserts over worldliness. The effect of the poem's dramatic presentation, as compared, say, to a traditional love song, is to drive the reader a long way home. Instead of merely enjoying the emotions of "love is best," he or she is forced to work through the distance of the dramatic scene, consider an alternative position, and finally adopt something close to the position of the listener in the poem. That the process of even such a monologic poem tends toward the creation of dialectical positions in the reader is clear in our residual uneasiness about that world of sun out there. We do not know if the listener/lover in the poem has other things to do; we are aware that the kinds of people typed by the sun—courtiers, peasants, ordinary folk—are not so different from ourselves in our daily mode in retaining some allegiance to getting up and getting going.

In a more argumentative and outlandish poem such as "The Flea," the conflict created in the overhearer is much more apparent. The listener in the poem is harder to follow, in any case, not a compliant lover the next morning but some mistress of some unspecified degree of coyness. We may be said to share with her whatever her response is to his elaborated plea on a flea for an end to chastity, as we try to work out our own role as overhearer listener: are we seduced? by his cleverness, perhaps, but repelled by the object of his wit and perhaps by his sacrilege. Are we angry at his boldness? but then he is just being cute. Are we amused only? Yet this is strong material pulling out Donne's great stops of love and religion.

It is a small step from such a Donne poem to some of the Browning monologues that have in part retained their interest just because they make it so difficult for the reader overhearer to establish a settled position as listener. The classic is of course "My Last Duchess." The listener in the poem, that poor envoy from the Count, virtually propels us by his moral inertia (and still he has not said a word) to move far away from his receptivity: to be the adverse listener looking to take a Browningesque role of rescuer, or at least avenger, of abused innocence. Yet

the more we hear the more we are subject to the counter-pressure of enthrallment to the Duke's rhetoric. We listen despite ourselves, and in listening are oppressed not so much by what lies in the closed heart of the Duke as by passive acceptance of the enormities we hear so magnificently presented. We are surprised not by sin but by our own moral lethargy. And how much can we protest when we, like the envoy, are swept on (no matter how many times we read it) by the fast pace of this duke of commercial persuasion and led down quickly past such beautiful emblems of enthrallment: "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea horse": the Duchess, perhaps, but surely ourselves, the reader, as well.

As a final example, look at another complex case where the reader's position is more that of unwilling complicity than protesting enthrallment. Andrea del Sarto speaks, of course, to someone with whom we can have little sympathy, that treacherous gold-bricking wife, impatient like a child to be off to her "cousin" and bored with Andrea's complex and intellectual talk. She is, we are quickly certain, at least a Philistine who takes no interest in art—"You don't understand / Nor care to understand about my art." Now this is not a position with which someone who bothers to read Browning or Donne will wish to identify. We feel that we can easily move into this scene of personal and domestic intimacy and provide for the poor artist the intelligent and understanding ear he deserves. And so we do, and hear, while she perhaps is not even listening but only fidgeting, his pathetic tale. The trouble is that what we hear is high brow enough but not pleasing. Andrea's story is bad enough: a cheat, a loser, a quitter, a man obsessed with money; but the way he tells it is worse, with the so annoying habit of starting attractive ideas and images only to tamp them down, gray the events, and finally close them out. Worst is the way he leans on the wife he clearly scorns and uses her to pass the blame on to someone else. She may be a loose woman but he is the one who turns relations into forms of prostitution. He pays her who pays the cousin. He even turns the process of listening to him into a form of sale. When she (and we) have listened an hour he bargains: "If you would sit thus by me every night / I should work better, do you comprehend? / I mean that I should earn more, give you more." We begin to realize that we too, like any analyst who overhears someone's self-destructive and rather serious problems for an hour, will be wanting some payment. Or, we will at least want to get away from this man who annoys and disturbs intensely as he holds us with his intelligence and artistic qualities. Despite the promptings of our better selves we are in effect moved to join with Lucrezia and go along to our preferable various cousins. Our short-lived adoption of this poor man

ends not in our being seduced but in our betraying him too. We end uneasily complicit with Lucrezia, trying to avoid recognition of where we fit in as readers.

Browning knew Donne well; he read him carefully during the period when he was looking for a new approach to poetry after the interesting dead end of the imitation of Romanticism in *Pauline*. Donne was in no sense his sole new model or the sole influence on the emergence of a very different kind of poetry in Browning: poetry learned, centered on argument, colloquial and dramatic in language, rich in variety and in vocabulary; nor was his use of a kind of poem very close to the dramatic monologue in the special dynamics it created with the reader the only one Browning knew. Yet in all these ways there is good reason to think Browning profited from his admiration of Donne. There is certainly every reason to speak of a tradition that stretches from Donne through Browning to the modernist movement on which both poets exerted a somewhat similar influence. If Browning could not have said "überhaupt ich stamm aus Donne" he would at least have said "ich stamm aus Donne." In either case he would have argued the case with passion, probably in reader-perplexing dramatic form, rather than ruminated over it.

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Notes

[1] "The Intellectual Kinship of John Donne and Robert Browning," *Studies in Philology* 50 (January 1953), 81-100, reprinted in his *The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry: The History of a Style, 1800 to the Present* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1959), pp. 50-69.

[2] *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846*, ed. Elvan Kintner (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), I, 139; II, 666.

[3] *The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia*, comp. Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley (Winfield, KS: Armstrong Browning Library et al., 1984), p. 71, items A 814, 816.1. I have not been able to see the first of these, known only from a Sotheby sales listing; the second has only recently come to light and is in the private collection of Michael Meredith, Windsor, England. Meredith generously allowed me to inspect the volumes. *The Poetical Works* is in three volumes, bound in one, and was given later to Browning's friend Alfred Domett. The title page of volume 2 is inscribed "Robt. Browning, 1834"; Browning has made numerous underlinings and added a signature, dated August 6, 1837, at the end of *The Progresse of the Soule*. The volumes suggest concentrated and extensive reading in Donne in the mid-1830s, with underlinings apparently at various times—as are, of course, the two dates. I have not attempted to guess Browning's references from this volume but look forward to a careful record and evaluation planned by its owner. Browning clearly read through the entire volumes.

[4] Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 166-67, 176-77, lists collected and selected works of Donne including Chalmers', Campbell's, and Southey's.

[5] Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, rev. F. G. Kenyon (London: Smith, Elder, 1908), p. 41.

[6] *Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed by Their Letters*, ed. Richard Curle (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1937), p. 85. Browning's mind may have been set off in this direction by Donne's poem on Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke's translation of the Psalms.

[7] Duncan, "The Intellectual Kinships of John Donne and Robert Browning," summarizes Browning's many references. Browning often mentions Donne in the letters to Elizabeth.

[8] He quotes the "Epistle" in the *Trifler* article of February 1835 (see below); Browning also refers to the poem in *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, ed. Paul Landis (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 317. The "Metempsychosis" referred to by William Michael Rossetti as a favorite of Browning's, not identified by Duncan, is probably also *The Progresse of the Soule*. The "Epistle" is marked by rows of three "x"s in Browning's copy of *The Poetical Works*.

[9] Published in my *Browning's Youth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 380-82, from the unique Widener copies of two issues of *The Trifler*. *Paracelsus* appeared after the *Trifler* article, which was for the February 1835 copy of the *Trifler*. The lyrics of 1834 are "Eyes Calm Beside Me" and "Still Ailing Wind," later incorporated in the unusually impressionistic and emotive dramatic lyric, "James Lee's Wife." Thomas Collins and John Pettigrew, *Robert Browning: The Poems* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), I, 1084-85, offer good reason to place the composition of "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover" in 1835, not 1834 as DeVane reported. Along with parts of *Paracelsus* they are the first appearances of Browning's mature dramatic style.

[10] *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett*, I, 25.

[11] Dorothy Mermin, *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983); Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and His Audiences* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984).