

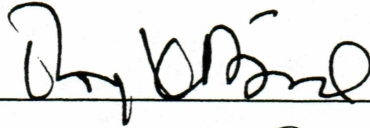
Reading the Text Right:

Robert Browning and Iconoclasm

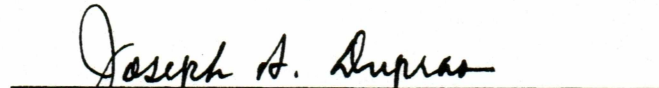
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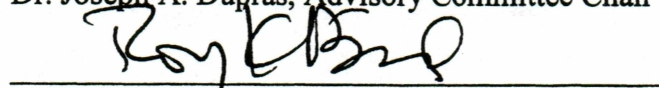
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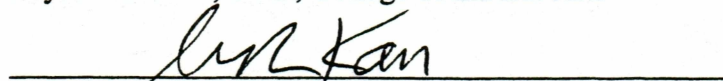


  
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Reading the Text Right:

Robert Browning and Iconoclasm

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

Of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

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### Abstract

This thesis explores Robert Browning's revolutionary, iconoclastic poetry. Browning utilizes revisionist methodology to approach individualistic truth. Using the idols Francis Bacon outlines in Novum Organum as a means by which to assess Browning's iconoclasm, the paper is organized according to the "Idols of the Theatre," philosophical iconoclasm; "Idols of the Cave," cultural iconoclasm; "Idols of the Market-Place," linguistic iconoclasm; and "Idols of the Tribe," perceptual iconoclasm. It includes analysis of Browning's philosophical iconoclasm in Paracelsus and "Fra Lippo Lippi;" his cultural iconoclasm in "Statue and the Bust," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Saul"; his linguistic iconoclasm in "An Epistle ... of Karshish, the Arab Physician" and "A Death in the Desert"; and his perceptual iconoclasm in "Caliban upon Setebos." Browning, while not overtly political, was revolutionary-minded in the way he viewed his art and the world. Breaking apart the idols of his readers, Browning incites the individual to revolution.

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## Reading the Text Right:

### Robert Browning and Iconoclasm

*Why, to be a Luther—that's a life to lead,*

*Incomparably better than my own.*

*He comes, reclaims God's earth for God, he says.*

*Sets up God's rule again by simple means,*

*Re-opens a shut book, and all is done.*

*He flared out in the flaring of mankind;*

*[.....]*

*Ice makes no conflagration. State the facts,*

*Read the text right, emancipate the world—*

*("Bishop Blougram's Apology," 568-73, 581-82)*

### Introduction

Robert Browning—known for dramatic monologues and a strong faith in God, for a youthful devotion to Shelley (complete with radical turn and wavering atheism) and a late-blooming social life, for clunky, enigmatic phrasing and eclectic knowledge—is not known as the revolutionary, heretical, iconoclast he was. In “The Decade’s Work in Browning Studies,” John Maynard assents that the major topics that need to be developed in Browning critical scholarship are religion, politics, and science (15-17). The subject of Browning and political religion allows an escape from the more well-worn study of Browning’s religious background and/or religious doubts, to focus instead on Browning’s revolutionary turn, which is partially a result of the two. Browning, in an age of post-

revolutionary progress (and of revolutionary change to the systems of academia) could not but be political. As a truly creative poet, or, according to Bloom's terminology, a "strong poet," his poetry is active and he is willing to "wrestle [his] strong precursors, even to the death" (Anxiety 5). However, Browning did not go to Italy to join the Risorgimento—he was not a political activist in the traditional sense. His activism was academic, his mouthpiece a sword. Some critics, Edward Berdoe, for example, have noticed Browning's innovative approach to religion and intellectual thought:

One of our greatest spiritual path-makers and Alp-tunnellers was Robert Browning. Deep down under the mountain he labored, practically forgotten, misunderstood, and neglected; yet he was foremost amongst the great constructors of the ways of intellectual activity. (xvi-xvii)

However, many critics have missed the importance of Browning's approach to theology and its political and philosophical ramifications. One possible reason this has happened is that our own rationalist age has downgraded the importance of religion, and has led to the placement of all people classified as religious into one benign category. Another possible reason is that Browning has already been widely studied as a religious poet, his work having been "reread to fit each generation's religious preoccupations" (Maynard, "Decade" 15). Some critics claim that Browning "discounted the mind [...] to support a religious faith which he feared must fall upon examination" (Crowell, The Triple Soul xi). However, by noticing the revisionist stance Browning staunchly takes in his poetry and his theology, we can learn more about Browning and his approach to his work—a whole Browning, not just Browning's soul or Browning's soulless body, but both.

Browning's call for revolution was for a philosophical revolution—a throwing off of religious and scholastic shackles, a primal desire to know the world anew and on his own terms. His iconoclasm was violent and far-reaching. Browning's primary missions in writing were to redefine philosophy and religion, and to lead others to do the same. Maynard claims that Browning scholarship lacks "more comprehensive and fully worked out approaches to both Browning's own discourse on politics and society and his larger place in a rapidly changing Victorian world" ("Decade's" 17). Perhaps the key to Browning's estimation of himself as a revolutionary is in the way in which he refers to other iconoclasts. Explaining Blougram's estimation of Martin Luther in "Bishop Blougram's Apology," Margaret Faurot points out: "the flaring out [...] is Browning's image for himself, and for Browning as for the Bishop signifies the freeing of poetic power" (11-12). As a "strong poet," Browning's aim was to misread and revise the world around him so as "to clear imaginative space" for himself (Bloom, *Anxiety* 5). The idea of misreading is also present in the passage about Luther. Luther "re-opens a shut book" by rereading the Bible and misreading the interpretations of it that were accepted into theological tradition (572). In comparison, Blougram claims he tries to only "read the text right," to give into popular interpretation and, so, free the world according to its own doctrine (582). However, prescribed, constricted freedom is not freedom at all. Although Blougram claims he "read[s] the text right," he also recognizes that true freedom only comes from a misreading like Luther's. Thus, the idea of "reading the text right" changes. Readers can interpret it right according to popular opinion, or deny the popular definition of reading it right altogether, and so free themselves to redefine what it means



to read a text right. For instance, Luther read the Bible right in a different way than Blougram; Blougram read it according to popular opinion, Luther read it to find new truths. Thus, reading a text right often means misreading it, denying the popular reading of it, and approaching the text afresh. Browning frees himself as a poet, a Christian, and a man by “flaring out” and re-opening shut books. His iconoclasm is not the action of revenge or anger, but of a subtle and persistent refusal to depend on the commonplace, all of the manifestations of the idols of society.

The term iconoclasm carries with it the weight of its definitions throughout history. However, in a broad sense, it can simply refer to the breaking of idols. The Oxford English Dictionary lists two primary definitions of idol, the first from the Greek usage, which means “appearance, phantom, unsubstantial form, image in water or a mirror, mental image, fancy, material image or statue,” and the second from the Jewish and Christian usage, which means “image of a false God” (“Idol” 3, 1). The term can reflect a combination of the two definitions; mainly, an idea that has been so solidified in human consciousness that it replaces what it originally meant to describe. A similar concept would be Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacra.” Thus, idols are anything that supercede a true understanding of the world, which Browning desperately wanted and viewed as his birthright. Using the examples of the iconoclastic influences in his life, such as Francis Bacon, Browning sought to break down philosophical, cultural, linguistic, and perceptual idols.

To the Victorians, Francis Bacon was an influential figure from the past, revolutionary-minded, influential intellectual. He has always been a controversial figure

and somewhat of an enigma. He has been thought to have written some of Shakespeare's plays, to have been homosexual, to have impregnated Lady Harron before her marriage to Edward Coke, and to have been a spy for Count de Gondomar, among other things (Coquillotte 14). Among the more scholarly debates that "have been discussed, quite literally, by thousands of writers for nearly four centuries" are:

Was Bacon a loyal and farseeing English political leader or, as Lord Macaulay has argued, an unprincipled and cruel totalitarian, deserving of impeachment and worse? Was Bacon religiously orthodox and devout or, as Bertrand Russell suggested, could he be secretly agnostic? (Coquillotte 15)

Browning was very interested in Bacon's writing, which influenced his education from the beginning. One of Browning's favorite childhood books, Nathaniel Wanley's Wonders of the Little World, was "answering Bacon's call in the Advancement of Learning for a kind of encyclopedia of man" (Maynard, Browning's 89). The creation of the new London University, which Browning attended, was influenced by Bacon's writing, as it sought a broad curriculum of all of human knowledge across time, instead of merely focusing on antiquity (Maynard, Browning's 265). Browning was not just influenced by Bacon through the structure of his education, but also in his very approach to life. Maynard describes the fiery, undeveloped Browning who emerges from London University as a "young enthusiast for Shelley, admirer of Bacon, and believer in the regeneration of the world" (Browning's 337). The combined radical spirit and progressive ideas of Shelley and Bacon gave Browning the courage to venture out into

the world as a poetic revolutionary.

Browning was not the only person of his time or even his social and poetic circles interested in Francis Bacon.<sup>1</sup> According to Charles Whitney, Shelley re-discovered Bacon as a “prophetic poet,” a discovery “some literary scholars in our century have ignored” (1). Although Bacon’s reception by Victorians varied from Jonson’s praise of Bacon’s knowledge to Swift’s admonishment of Bacon’s philistinism, some like Rousseau praised Bacon’s “courageous iconoclasm” and saw him as a revolutionary figure (Whitney 1). Bacon anticipated modern issues in his interest in the difference between the past and the present, especially how that change relates to learning (Whitney 2). Whitney describes Bacon’s philosophy as a mixture of reform and revolution (4). Shelley must have felt a strong connection to the power and controversy of Bacon’s philosophy; not only is Shelley “one of the most consistently philosophical poets in the English language” but his career was also dominated by his concern for politics (Clark 13, 1). Shelley references Bacon in “What Metaphysics Are” in 1815, probably after reading Novum Organum (Clark 21-22), in regards to how humans try to go about understanding the world via the inductive method (23). However, another aspect of Bacon in which Shelley was greatly interested was Bacon’s outline of idols in Novum Organum.

Bacon used the word idol as Democritus uses it, “eidola,” which means “the sense perception by the means of emission of particles” (Coquillette 228) or “a phantom or apparition; an image of an ideal” (“Eidolon”). Democritus uses the term to demonstrate the way false images are accepted as real: ““on entering the human soul, [they] produce

conventional and not true or genuine, opinions” (qtd. in Coquillette 228). Bacon takes the next step in this argument and identifies what exactly constitute *eidola* in his time. Interestingly, Bacon maintains modern spelling of the word, and calls his *eidola* “idols.” Coquillette claims that Bacon “certainly was not referring to the word’s conventional meaning, i.e. a physical image as an object of worship, or ‘the image of a false god’” (228); however, the word idol need not be so narrowly defined. Among the many definitions of idol, the word can also refer to “images or figures of divine beings and saints, and more generally, to any material object of worship in a Christian church,” “an image, effigy, or figure of a person or thing,” “a counterpart, likeness, imitation,” “an inert, inactive person,” or “a false mental image or conception,” among others (“Idol,” 1.B, 3.A, B, 4.A, 6.B). So it seems as though Bacon is combining the terms idol and eidola to create a philosophy focused on an idea both ancient and very applicable to his time.

The idols Bacon enumerates cover almost every conceivable aspect of scholarship. “Idols of the Theatre” pertains to the apparitions created by philosophies that, like a theatrical production, create their own system of ideas without a basis in reality (Coquillette 230). The traditional point of censuring the theatre for its mimesis and falsehood underlies this Idol. However, Bacon links that conservative idea of falsehood to a very controversial one, that everything is falsehood. Much of the controversy about Bacon’s Christianity is focused on his idea of truth. Bacon believed in a “duality of truth” (Coquillette 16) in which divinely inspired truth and empirically found truth can coexist even if they are mutually exclusive. In this way, Bacon foresaw

much of the later controversies of the nineteenth century in which many people could not bridge the gap they saw forming between God's truth and man's. Philosophical idols are broken in Paracelsus and "Fra Lippo Lippi" and readers are encouraged to break the strangling grasp of past texts so that they can respond to the Truth they see.

A second category of idols is "The Idols of the Cave," which are the idols of each individual mind. Very similar to Plato's cave in which humans can see only shadows, the cave to which Bacon refers is symbolic of the human mind. Individual perception is altered by "his own proper and peculiar nature or [...] his education and conversation with others" (Coquillotte 229), or basically, every aspect of nature and nurture that make up the individual psyche. "The Statue and the Bust," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Saul" all advocate the breaking of cultural idols that prevent an individual from purely experiencing the life they were created to live and the message of the Bible.

A third category, "The Idols of the Market-Place," highlights problems of communication because of the inadequacies of language (Coquillotte 229). This category was by far the most dangerous of all of the idols because words permeate, and ultimately obscure, every aspect of scholarship and learning. To Bacon, the fundamental problem with language is its inherent deceitfulness. He outlines a situation in which scholars argue about the definition of a word, "yet even definitions cannot cure this evil in dealing with natural and material things; since the definitions themselves consist of words, and those words beget others" (qtd. in Coquillotte 231). This idea of the indeterminacy of language is the backbone of later philosophies of linguistics and literary criticism. Through this kind of work, Bacon reaches into the modern era, where linguists like

Ferdinand de Saussure later claim that “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (67). If language is the original speakers’ perceptions of reality manifested in signifiers, even if arbitrarily chosen, then the language itself is a tool repressing perception. “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician” and “A Death in the Desert” both illustrate Browning breaking the idols of language, advocating his readers do the same, to reread, even misread, the Bible in order to truly know God.

“Idols of the Tribe,” cover the perceptual problems common to all humans. Bacon claims that “human understanding is like a false mirror” (Coquillotte 229), a phrase which calls to mind 1 Corinthians 13.12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the first idol is perception that fundamentally clouds human understanding of the world. Through Caliban’s perceptualized theology in “Caliban upon Setebos; or Natural Theology in the Island,” Browning questions the possibility of escaping clouding perspectives to see Truth.

Shelley reinterpreted Bacon’s idols in his own terms. This re-creation of philosophy becomes a large part of Shelley’s poetics. Shelley’s concept of the ideal came from Bacon’s Idols of the Cave, but instead of consisting of everything that keeps a person from the truth, Shelley’s “idola specus,” “idols of the cave,” is optimistic in its view of individualization. Similar to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s later idea of inscape, Shelley’s idols are “an active power constituting the genuine individuality of a person, impressing itself on every action” (Clark 72). This individualized perception creates with

it a unique way of seeing the world. Thus, a perceptual image (Clark 73) guides the poet to create an ideal, or idol, the poem, which is another positive compilation of images that creates a new image (80). Thus, Shelley misread Bacon, according to Bloom's usage of the word, breaking Bacon's idol, his philosophy, to re-create a new image—Shelley's poetics. Even Shelley's concept of an idol as the ideal image started as a way for him to interpret Christ from the Apostles' accounts in the Gospels (Clark 72). Shelley endeavored to filter through the authors to find Christ—to closely read, or even misread, the Bible, to find the real Truth beneath.

Likewise, Browning sought to break idols in their philosophical, theological, perceptual, and linguistic forms because it was only through breaking them that he could find a true connection to his own humanity and his place in the world. He claims the importance of a poet who can “replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; getting at a new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of unclassed value” (Shelley 12). Although the evidence of Bacon's direct influence on Browning's poetics exists primarily in Baconian images Browning uses,<sup>3</sup> Bacon's idols can serve as a means to describe Browning's iconoclasm. As opposed to Baconian philosophy, very focused on societal reform, Browning's focus is not on the society at large, but on how the individual navigates within it. His is a personal revolution, and he offers it to his readers to experience on their own.

It is important first to establish why Browning would be so interested in iconoclasm. Bacon's influence is well-documented, but Browning also grew up in a

culture of change and rebuilding. That culture prepared Browning to see the world as needing change and himself as able to induce it. Robert Browning was born at a time of revolution and reform. Although the French and American Revolutions had already taken place, their reverberations were felt throughout European countries such as Italy, and the democratic ideal became not just a basis for a system of government, but a promise of rights that was not always kept. As a result, the Victorian Age was one of great social reform, in which politics crept into every aspect of the culture.

The Protestantism that Browning experienced was the heir to a politically driven and reform-minded religion. As social discontent ruptured into revolution across the globe, Protestantism became the dominant force in Great Britain. Even the name "Great Britain" was created in 1707 when the Parliament of Westminster passed the Act of Union, which connected Scotland to England and Wales, and declared that Great Britain would have one Protestant ruler, one system of government, and one system of free trade (Colley 11). Protestantism, thus empowered, united government and church because of the personal connection Protestants felt to God and His seemingly political will. Assurance of God-appointed, Protestant leadership allowed Great Britain to have a national and spiritual self-righteousness, which an English government often at odds with the Papacy might not have had. According to Colley, "Protestantism lay at the core of British national identity" (369). This identity was furthered by anti-Catholic propaganda from John Foxe's Book of Martyrs, first printed in 1563 and reprinted from 1761-1795, to John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, printed from 1678-1790 (Colley 25-28). Foxe's Book of Martyrs was much more overtly anti-Catholic, cataloguing the death of



Protestant martyr after martyr in extremely gruesome detail, but The Pilgrim's Progress also featured Catholics as the ones who seek to prevent the pilgrims from reaching the Heavenly City (Colley 27-28).

Browning owned a copy of The Pilgrim's Progress, as well as The Pilgrim's Progress, with Explanatory Notes by T. Scott, and a Life of the Author by J. Condor, and a compilation of John Bunyan's works (Coley and Kelley 47). While many (if not most) major Protestant writers of Browning's time period also probably had a copy of the book, the prevalence of the Protestant group mentality is interesting. Catholics and Jews posed a threat to Protestant cohesion to the point that Cyrus Mason, Browning's cousin, wrote a book in which he exonerated Browning of accused Jewish sympathies. According to Karlin and Woolford, Browning, however, was "tolerant in his religious attitudes" toward many different religions (222). Maynard describes Browning's religious approach to Catholicism: "If he was not the fire-breathing anti-Papist he has sometimes been taken for, he had, both by upbringing and temperament, a natural distrust for institutional and authoritarian Catholic tradition" (Browning's 313). Religion was a construct of politics in Browning's mind, and Protestantism a means of gaining an individual, democratic relationship to God.

This kind of blended religious and political individualism was prevalent in the Romantics, who were also largely liberal (even radical) in their political orientation. Browning was at first eagerly supportive of Radical causes, probably because he was so influenced by Shelley (Karlin and Woolford 160-61). Poems such as "The Lost Leader," "The Italian in England," and "De Gustibus—" indicate that he was even willing to

support Radical causes with actual violence (Karlin and Woolford 162), mirroring the support of many of the Romantics for the French Revolution. Browning's Radical politics evolved over time to Liberal beliefs, as evident in a change in his social circles and his later revision of "The Lost Leader" (Karlin and Woolford 164-65). Some of his frustrations with Radicalism might have come from his observance of the failed Risorgimento when he lived in Italy. Although England had "only a small measure of democracy" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Italy had even less (Hawlin 27). Living in Italy must have been to Browning what observing the French Revolution was to many of the Romantic poets. In Italy, the religious (Catholic) and political leaders were forced to give more and more concessions to the people until the social upheaval reached an apex and the Austrian army marched beneath the windows of the Brownings' Casa Guidi to restore conservative rule (Hawling 27). Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the poet to write explicitly about the Risorgimento, some of Browning's poems, such as "Cenciija," were "virulently anti-Catholic and anti-patriarchal" (Karlin and Woolford 180), blending his religious and political views to espouse a democratic philosophy.

A fundamental difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is in the delineation of power and inspiration. The determination of who gets to have the power of defining inspiration and distributing power is, at its core, a political issue. Early Protestants drew the distinction between their democratic distribution of power and Catholics' class-oriented, patriarchal, authoritarian (mis)rule. Foxe's Book of Martyrs distanced Catholicism from democratic patriotism in two ways: by linking Roman Catholicism to foreign intervention, and by characterizing the martyrs as Everyman

(including women, men, the poor, the rich, the social leaders, the socially insignificant, the young and the old) (Colley 27). Protestantism, or an atheism like Shelley's, subverts an authoritarian system by redefining the distribution of inspiration and power.

Browning's religious background and affiliations greatly impacted his view of Protestantism and individualism, which in turn led him toward an ultra-individualistic iconoclasm. According to Hawlin, Browning's mother was a "devout Nonconformist Christian," and he was baptized at a Nonconformist, or a Congregational church (5). In his youth, Browning attended the York Street Congregational Church on Sunday mornings and the Camden Episcopal Chapel on Sunday evenings (Maynard, Browning's 15). However, Browning was soon disconcerted by the York Street Congregational Church, to the point that he began gnawing at the tops of the mahogany pews (Maynard, Browning's 60). Browning began to question the closely defined Calvinist religious doctrine, even as it was tempered with a liberal translation in the Congregational church, and began to question Christianity itself. This Bible-based background—combined with a strong, individualistic, and questioning mind—empowered Browning to dissent even from the dissenters.

W. J. Fox, a Unitarian preacher, Browning's initial publisher, and a Browning family friend, perhaps changed the way Browning viewed the Bible and led to the poet's later redefinition of the Trinity in works such as "A Death in the Desert." The Unitarians held many beliefs, particularly about the Trinity, Jesus, and the Bible, that differed from the orthodox Christians. Unitarians, as the name implies, do not believe in the Trinity (Elgin 73). Unitarians such as Channing "regard the Scriptures as the records of God's

successive Revelation to mankind, and particularly of the last and most perfect revelation of his will by Jesus Christ” (Channing 48). However, they also believe “that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books” (Channing 49). Rationalism is at the heart of their beliefs about religion: “Say what we may, God has given us a rational nature, and will call us to account for it. [...] Revelation is addressed to us as rational beings” (Channing 55). Thus, to the Unitarians, God is God alone, Jesus is inferior to God, and the Bible is from God, written for men to read rationally. Browning probably learned from Fox to see the Bible as a text from which to draw ethical wisdom, not necessarily in terms of hermeneutics (Maynard, Browning’s 309). This allowed for the Bible to become once again open to Browning as a source of creativity, which he challenged by misreading it, always refusing to “read the text right.”

The religious freedom that surrounded him must have inspired Browning’s poetic sensibilities. Instead of the freedom of interpretation making truth purely relative, it allowed Browning to venture toward a Truth he believed existed. Unlike some poets of Browning’s day, he did not think that even he could fully reach the Truth.<sup>4</sup> Like Francis Bacon, Browning believed in a duality of truth: God’s view of truth and man’s. Man’s truth is only truth in part (1 Cor. 13.12), and so, inherently false (Crowell, The Triple 84). This Platonic idea of a Truth to be remembered by the individual could only be attained in Browning’s philosophy in a perfect combination of the subjective and objective, the ethereal and the visceral. His poetic endeavor was to combine God’s truth and man’s to achieve a Truth man can grasp, one that places the infinite in the finite.

The Romantics believed in a revolutionary, democratic ideal of an inner knowledge that one could reach through poetry and a true communion with life. To reach that inner knowledge, which later critics like Kristeva would come to call the “chora,” a poet must be able to break through the bounds of the physical, mundane world to reach the sublime, spiritual world. This breaking of bounds becomes metaphysical iconoclasm, breaking the idols of the material world, including visceral misperceptions, and getting to the hidden truth of life. Browning stretched the political side of metaphysical individuality to its limit in his poetry, invoking a new age of ideological, theological, and linguistic iconoclasm through his poetry. Browning’s religious background led to his desiring freedom from the world’s idols as a means to connect to Truth and his use of iconoclasm to get to it. Although swayed temporarily by Shelley’s rationalistic atheism, Browning later returned to a belief in God, albeit somewhat unconventional: “In an unstable world, Browning seems to assert, where knowledge is fleeting and deceptive, that at the very least he can be sure of his own existence and of God’s” (Lawson 4). Browning obviously does not advocate removing the Bible from a dissenting Christian’s active or reflective life: he includes biblical references or rewrites Bible stories in almost every poem he writes. Nevertheless, he changes the meaning of “reading [any] text right” by redefining a right reading.

Before and during the Victorian age, a revolutionary spirit was fueled not only by political philosophy but also by science and technological breakthroughs. Such advances usually had spiritual implications, such as the popularity of rapping after the advent of Morse code. However, the implications for Christianity intensified as archeology

combined with rationalism to introduce doubt about the authenticity of Scripture. For a religion based so strongly on a single text, such doubt called into question the power of the Christian leaders as well as the Church itself. With the ideals of democracy gaining momentum, such blind faith in ecclesiastical leadership looked dangerously like the rule of an authoritarian government. The question of spiritual inspiration is also important because Church leaders could maintain leadership if they could convince the people that they were inspired or spiritually marked to be mediums of the biblical text. So, the doubt about Scripture could be dissolved if church-goers could be convinced that the text is alive and being continually spiritually replenished by God and translated into sermon by clergy. However, the Romantic movement threatened the spiritual cogency of pastoralism, because it allowed every man and woman to try that role. Suddenly everyone willing to become an æolian harp could, and spiritual inspiration was democratic, instead of being windy and autocratic.

Although Romanticism influenced Browning, many aspects of his writing and his philosophy differed drastically. Maynard explains the influence Romanticism had on Browning's development as a writer and independence as a thinker:

For Browning was not only heir to the Romantics but also a poet who independently discovered in his own early life the central romantic preoccupation with self-consciousness and individuality and who then progressed in his own way back from this discovery toward a revised general vision of man. (Browning's 73)

Browning's deviation from the Romantic tradition partly comes (perhaps ironically) from

his understanding of and dedication to a democratic view of art and the duality of truth. A fundamental problem that many critics see today with the Romantics is this idea of transcendence and the poet as the interpreter and disseminator of truth. Browning, too, recognized the inherent elitism in such a system. Romanticism also had a humanistic bent that denied the need for or even the existence of God. According to John Woolford in Browning the Revisionary, “he came to regard Romantic humanism as radically defective both in what he took to be its elevation of the poet and in its anti-religious tendencies” (x). Rejecting these aspects of Romanticism, Browning endeavored in his poetry to establish “a religious humanism based on the equality of all mankind” and the purpose of the poet to “use his powers on their behalf, equalising them with himself” (Woolford x). Spiritual inspiration became so democratic for the Romantics that the idea of a single God and a single Truth seemed to some like “the absolute type of political tyranny” (Woolford 9). However, Browning saw liberty as “a theological rather than a social privilege” (Woolford 9). Browning offers the challenge of interpretation to his readers, encouraging them to find their own “right” reading, instead of offering to interpret the world for them.

Browning responded to his own humanistic brand of Christianity in his poetry by renegotiating his understanding of the Bible. According to Margaret Faurot, “Browning was no different from his great contemporaries in looking to poetry to support a spirit faltering in the loss of faith” (1). Revising Scripture was a way for Browning to re-form spiritual connections and to make God come alive again, to cause flat ideas to spring into three-dimensional ones. The Bible easily becomes merely a catalogue of words that have

lost their original meaning, a storage place of idols that represent a false church because people have lost the ability to spiritually connect to them on an individualistic level. The false philosophies and philosophical idols that inundate the churches and universities obscure not only the individual's theology and learning but also strip away the individual's innate right to experience the world without impediments. However, Browning did not believe in absolute individualism: "Central to Browning is the concept that man is tested as an individual, not in groups; but part of the test is his fulfillment of responsibilities" (Crowell, The Convex 84). According to Norton Crowell, Browning believed in Truth, but also that "all man's truths shift and change as he [man] progresses toward absolute truth" (The Convex 84). Browning advocates iconoclasm, pulling down philosophical, cultural, linguistic, and perceptual idols to gain direct access to God and to have a clearer understanding of His Truth.



## Chapter One

### Idols of the Theatre:

#### Philosophical Iconoclasm in Paracelsus and “Fra Lippo Lippi”

*“A tribe of successors (Homerides) working more or less in the same spirit, dwell on his discoveries and reinforce his doctrine; till, at unawares, the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year’s harvest. Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; getting at new substance by breaking up the assumed wholes into parts of independent and unclassed value.”*  
(Browning, Shelley 11-12)

According to Harold Bloom, all writers misread each other: “Any poem is an inter-poem and any reading of a poem is an inter-reading. A poem is not writing, but rewriting, and though a strong poem is a fresh start, such a start is a starting-again” (Poetry 3). As Shelley saw Bacon as a sort of extreme against which to work, so Browning came to see Shelley as a similar extreme. Browning wrote about poets building upon previous poets:

The inevitable process, its very sufficiency to itself shall require, at length, an exposition of its affinity to something higher,—when the positive yet conflicting facts shall again precipitate themselves under a harmonizing law, and one more degree will be apparent for a poet to climb in that

mighty ladder, of which however cloud-involved and undefined may  
glimmer the utmost step, the world dares no longer doubt that its  
gradations ascend. (Shelley 12)

At first, Browning attempted to match what he characterized as Shelley's subjective poetic nature in Pauline. In this poem, which is a blending of fiction and autobiography, Browning reworked himself as Shelley, and Shelley as a Christian (Hawlin 48). Paracelsus, the first poem with Browning's name attached, could even be read as a rewriting of Shelley's preface to "Alastor" (Hawlin 52). Aprile, the Italian poet of Paracelsus, a character who provides a foil for Paracelsus in their divergent searches for love and knowledge, is even thought by some to be modeled after Shelley (Loucks 5). Browning thought of it as a radical poem and as his introduction to the world as an eccentric poet, as he wrote to his friend and editor W. J. Fox: "I shall affix my name & stick my arms akimbo; there are precious bold bits here & there, & the drift & scope are awfully radical—I am 'off' for ever with the other side" (qtd. in Karlin and Woolford 161). What was so intrinsically revolutionary about Paracelsus, the story of a young doctor who seeks to rise to an intellectual ideal that cannot quite be reached? Perhaps it is that it deals with the idea of breaking free of the shackles of past systems of knowledge. Bacon's "Idols of the Theatre" refer to the apparitions created by philosophies that, like a play, create their own system of ideas that are not actually based on reality (Coquillotte 230). Browning seems to have been, from the beginning, interested in the ways poets break conventional ideas to create interpretive space for their own philosophies.

In the fourth book, Paracelsus is relieved of his position because of the threat he posed to previous, more comfortable and accepted, modes of thinking. Immediately after describing the events to his friend, Festus, Paracelsus smiles “with as very contempt as ever turned / Flesh into stone” (4.135-36). Paracelsus’s simultaneous smile and simile introduce the idea of the Gorgon, which Browning later utilizes in “Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha,” and connects stone-making to the stagnant ideologies Paracelsus sees around him at Basil. Paracelsus sees the traditional ways of thinking as cemented into solid entities, idols, that replace the truth and circumvent the need for truth seeking.

In his anger, Paracelsus is tempted to play the same intellectual game as those around him, to separate truth from philosophy and set himself up in the powerful role of the false teacher. Though Paracelsus would like to see himself as a pure intellectualist, even he has allowed the idolatry of philosophy to begin, even in the way he sees himself. He claims an intellectual supremacy to his peers: “I am above them like a god, there’s no / Hiding the fact” (4.294-95). However, as he later explains to Festus, even this boast is an idle philosophy which Paracelsus had led Festus to believe was true. In this way, Paracelsus seems to have become a part of the very type of intellectual deceit that he hated. His words deconstruct his message and reveal that his intellectual integrity might have already been compromised. Paracelsus’s dilemma is also the dilemma of the poet, what John Woolford describes as “embarrassment of power” in Browning the Revisionary (18). “Embarrassment of power” is the problem an anarchist faces once revolution is attained: the power that was supposed to dissolve into the people en masse has merely changed hands, and he or she is offered that power, a power that goes against

revolutionary ideals. The story of Paracelsus reveals the inherent dangers of aspirations for personal intellectual evolution, such as the way in which humans naturally work to push everything to absolutes, to tangible beliefs, to try to control the world around them. If any accepted idea stands still long enough, it will become catatonic, ceasing to grow or evolve. However, religious and scientific communities seek these kinds of ideas—the laws, the truths, the absolutes of the universe about which humans long to wrap their fingers and control.

One of the main reasons truth is a noun rather than a verb—which it probably should be—is that once a person “controls” an idea, it often becomes not only stagnant, unable to continue to grow, but also rooted to the projected self-concept of the person who sought to control it. It becomes the idol the scholar creates for himself or herself. Pride can then prevent the scholar from aspiring to a perfection in the creation and/or the presentation of that idea. Paracelsus describes such a process to Festus in the form of a parable. Ships traveling with majestic cargo secured with wood and covered by purple tents arrive at an island, “a rock” (4.493), and the crew uncovers the cargo to find “a hundred shapes of lucid stone” (4.500). The men build “a shrine of rock around every one” of the stones (4.502), but when they find a better place they could have put the stones than the harsh rock island, they cannot move them because they “have no heart to mar [their] work” (4.522). The idea of a statue is immediately applied to man—God’s creation of clay. Paracelsus sees himself as a creation, as the stone form cast on the rock island of the physical world:

I am of a different mould.

[.....]

[...] this is alone

The sphere of its increase, as far as men

Increase it; why then, look beyond this sphere?

We are his glory; and if we be glorious,

Is not the thing achieved? (4.595, 600-04)

However, clay can still be malleable. Paracelsus's lies and false philosophies, like chemicals, harden the clay into stone, which Paracelsus describes as "my outward crust" (4.629).

Paracelsus, as a poet, has created his own work in his self-representation to Festus. He has re-created himself, molding his linguistic body with words, shaping his psyche beneath them. The conversational format of Part IV of Paracelsus allows Paracelsus to shift obviously beneath the critical eye of Festus, a character who knows Paracelsus from childhood and who can compare his childhood self-representation to his adult speeches. Paracelsus responds to Festus's criticism:

You are no stupid dupe:

You find me out!

Yes, I had sent for you

To palm these childish lies upon you, Festus!

Laugh—you shall laugh at me. (4.324-27)

Paracelsus represents himself to Festus as one, if not the only one, truly seeking the truth, only to lie to him. Paracelsus's deceit seems to test whether Festus knows him, but

perhaps it also tests how powerful Paracelsus's philosophical creations are. He asks Festus:

Do you not scorn me from your heart of hearts,  
 Me and my cant each petty subterfuge,  
 My rhymes and all this frothy shower of words,  
 My glozing self-deceit, my outward crust  
 Of lies which wrap, as tetter, morphew, furfair  
 Wrapt the sound flesh? (4.626-31)

The "sound flesh" he has created is full of skin diseases: the words are tearing apart, flaking off, and changing colors. The lies help to rip apart his text, as do the individual words. He is, thus, deconstructing himself verbally. Paracelsus's "glozing self-deceit" covers over his inadequacies in his own eyes, while providing the reader, as well as Festus, with a means of interpreting his text. This point of glossing could also be the thing that begins to unravel the text, that makes the words fester. They are the sores that begin to eat away at the surface of the text.

Words cannot help but misrepresent meaning. Everything in this system is connected; every creation is misprision. Although we build them up as great statues, words end up as merely misplaced rocks; the bonds between reality and its representation are "arbitrary" (Saussure 67). After all, Paracelsus claims, "We live and breathe deceiving and deceived" (4.625). Words are deceptions of their own, like the apparitions of the theatre, proposing to present reality, but really only tangentially connected.<sup>5</sup> In "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," Master Hugues's student realizes toward the end of the

poem that there can hardly be room for a “glimpse of the far land” beyond “our comments and glozes” (119-20). Again the word gloze represents the glossy creations humans place before the altar of truth that only obscure it more. Mr. Sludge uses the word to refer to his positive account of his deceit: “Why should I set so fine a gloss on things?” (1345). The idea of glosses must have been very important to Browning, as some form of the word is used in nineteen of Browning’s poems.

Truth is continually pulled apart by words trying to express it; however, there must be some type of truth to seek which the poet endeavors to find. In the end, Paracelsus’s search for knowledge ends in his searching for spiritual truth, with the anxiety and knowledge that words are still insufficient to even explain the lack of attainable truth on earth: “You understand me? I have said enough?” (5.904). His grammatical structure has broken down in the second question, which seems a questioning statement more than a question. However, Paracelsus still seems to have confidence in his knowledge of a greater truth, whether or not the attainment or application of it is altogether possible in this world. He feels allied with a number of intellectually evolved people who “grow too great / For narrow creeds or right and wrong, which fade / Before unmeasured thirst for good” (5.780-82). Such a philosophy, however, is similar to Nietzsche’s superman. Browning, as well as Nietzsche, was aware of the idea of intellectual evolution. Furthermore, both were aware of its dangers. By continually re-presenting himself, Paracelsus prevents readers from considering him as having reached a comfortable redemption. This self-reformation, fracturing his ability to fit conventions that readers learn in order to interpret, makes his character problematic in

Browning's typically re-creative style. Such a psychological and artistic process thus breaks the poem out of the traditional mold of story structure, breaking down its own idol.

The character of Paracelsus also resembles Bacon. They had a similar reaction of the established intelligentsia of their time. According to Browning's endnote to the poem in which he translates M. Renaudin's passage about Paracelsus in the "Biographie Universelle, Paris," Paracelsus denies the authority of past scholars from the beginning of this time at Basil:

There Paracelsus began by burning publicly in the amphitheatre the works of Avicenna and Galen, assuring his auditors that the latchets of his shoes were more instructed than those two physicians; that all Universities, all writers put together, were less gifted than the hairs of his beard and the crown of his head. (qtd. in Browning, The Poems 1.141)

Likewise, in his Advancement of Learning, Francis Bacon began listing the problems of epistemological reform arising from outside sources and engrained philosophical bias. He is courageous enough to provide a list of names, with their individual intellectual fallacies, which probably had a similar effect on the intelligentsia of his day as Paracelsus's book burning did at Basil. The list includes many names of those who have been lauded as great thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Proclus, Cicero, and others (16).

Paracelsus seems inspired by such behavior, and even quotes Bacon. Paracelsus tells Festus, "One like you needs not be told / We live and breathe deceiving and deceived" (4.624-25). These lines echoe Bacon's in Advancement of Learning:



This vice therefore brancheth itself into two sorts; delight in deceiving and aptness to be deceived; imposture and credulity; which, although they appear to be of a diverse nature, the one seeming to proceed of cunning and the other of simplicity, yet certainly they do for the most part concur: for, as the verse noteth,

“Percontatorem fugito, nam garrulus idem est.”

“I flee the inquisitive man, for he is also a tattler.” [Horace,

Epistles I, XVIII.69] (Bacon 13)

Linked with Bacon, Paracelsus thus becomes a more sinister character; he seems to understand the kinds of fallacies Bacon is guarding against, but uses them nonetheless. The belief he adheres to about all being deceiving or deceived comes from a passage in which Bacon calls this “disease of learning” “of all the rest the foulest” because it destroys the essence of truth both in the projection and reflection of truth, the “truth of being and the truth of knowing” (Bacon 13). Paracelsus’s skin disease of his “sound flesh” (Paracelsus 4.631) is thus a representation of the disease that is rotting him from the inside, as well as a test of our reception of his deceit. Paracelsus proves to be an extremely apt chameleon, changing from the image of a respected intellectual reformer such as Bacon, to the epitome of the very rotted soul of the intellectual world that needs to be reformed.

Leadership need not always be false. There are true leaders meant to break down the idols of the past to allow for new connections to be made to God. As Revelation describes, leaders that can overcome false teachings can “rule over nations” and “dash

them to pieces like pottery” (2.25-29). One could argue that the setting up of leaders is in itself an iconic system; however, the leader Revelation refers to has the “morning star,” which is perhaps some kind of truth-finding mechanism, some internal compass that can keep him from abusing his position of leadership. The description of the leader with the morning star does not have to apply to only one leader. The possible multiplicity of leaders with the morning star prevents the establishment of dictatorship, and instead pushes toward a democratic leadership system. Probably because the image fits his philosophy of leadership, Browning uses the image of the “morning-star” nine times in his poetry. Jesus is the leader in Revelation who claims the title of morning star: “I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star” (22.16). However, according to the description in Rev. 2.25-29, any person by following God’s will and overcoming false teaching can become the leader whom the “morning star” leads. Thus, the divine right of kings is extended to other democratic types of leadership; and, likewise, Jesus can live in the hearts of men, His divinity becoming theirs.

However, iconoclasm does not require divine or even moral characteristics. An iconoclast only needs fresh, courageous vision. “Fra Lippo Lippi,” through its manipulative title character, highlights the iconoclastic nature of artistic creation. Fra Lippo Lippi is continually exercising the powerful, creative aspects of his art in the poem, which starts with his being choked by a guard who has caught the painter-monk in a bad part of town at night. Lippi immediately pulls rank, naming a close, powerful friend who could come to his rescue. When this strategy does not work, Lippi begins creating a story to weave his way out of his predicament. He first flatters the guards by imagining them

in his paintings (“Just such a face!” [26]), but his flattery is suspect, or should be to the reader, because some biblical characters he mentions are very abhorrent: Judas and the accomplice to John the Baptist’s murderer. Such characterizations also make him the martyr in their hands. Lippi sees reality as continually created and uses his power as a creator to his advantage. When recognized as a famous painter, he responds, crediting the guard with the creation of his fame and vocation by speaking it into being: “Yes, I’m the painter, since you styled me so” (39). In an attempt to evoke pity from the guards, Lippi sings the folksong that had lured him from his room. The effect is enchanting, as if the merry-makers were suddenly created before the guards. His artistry creates his world before the eyes of the guards, as they perceive him as a victim and a genius, and they accept his reasoning in trying to escape.

Throughout the monologue, he demonstrates his power as an artistic creator and manipulator of his audience’s perception. His language, full of colorful images and similes, create the story into reality in his listeners’ minds, such as “My stomach being empty as your hat” (86). As he talks about drawing for the first time, he does so in terms of music and words:

I drew men’s faces on my copy-books  
 [.....]  
 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,  
 Found eyes and nose and chin for A’s and B’s,  
 And made a string of pictures of the world  
 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,

[...] The monks looked black. (129-35)

His creation of pictures from words and music is layered as he creates the image of his story through words and his voice, just as Browning creates his story within a story in words and melodic poetry. The end result is that the listener/observer is the object of satire, such as Lippi's biblical characterizations of the guards, or the monks that "look black" (135). Likewise, the readers, charmed by Lippi's charismatic personality, see themselves in him.

Lippi's experience painting a fresco in a monastery further connects the role of artist and satirist. He paints the members of the monastery as he sees them, in all of their humanity and their sin, giving them "the mark of painting" (176) and the monks reprimand him for it. The Prior tells him that painting reality in such a way is "devil's-game" (178), and that the purpose of art is to overlook human reality to the spiritual realm. Lippi admits "I'm a beast, I know" (270), but explains that he simply paints the world God made. This distinction between painting things as we would wish them to be and as they are—painting the spiritual instead of the visceral—places an interesting hierarchy on a reality that, according to the monks, is entirely God-created. Everyone in this situation is playing God and creating their reality or their view of their reality. In the case of the Prior, he calls his mistress his niece, and in that act of naming, creates a new reality for himself and for anyone that chooses to believe him. In such a shifting universe, true reality is difficult to find: "There's the grey beginning" (392). However, in such a construct, only one part of the listener/speaker, reader/writer remains free of irony—God—because "Humanity's self-making, with all its attendant ironies, can be

undergone only in the presence of an absolute Third, namely God” (Shaw 441). God, the silent third party, watches over the listener/speaker, writer/reader relationships, and is Truth.

The character of Fra Lippo Lippi is problematic as a truth-seeking iconoclast, because he seems too manipulative to be a trustworthy leader. He seems to use his art only for personal gain, even being willing to “paint / To please them” (243-44). However, it seems that sometimes such a reformer happens upon reform almost by accident, and leaves the readers to ponder whether Fra Lippo Lippi’s ridicule of the Church subverts his own self-proclaimed reforming instincts. The answer lies in the spaces between the layers of relationships in the text, and might change depending on the interpretation of the reader. Having to question Fra Lippo Lippi’s motives makes the role of writer problematic, as Browning typically does, as power-holder, performer, or peon. Margaret Faurot describes the effect that the questionable nature of Browning’s characters has on his monologues: “the unsettling question inherent in the Browning corpus, thematic in Paracelsus, and explicit in ‘Pictor Ignotus,’ ‘Mr. Sludge,’ ‘The Medium,’” and ‘A Death in the Desert’: Can less than perfect candor be the vehicle of truth?” (1) However, the use of a passionate, imperfect man as the vehicle for iconoclastic reform is vital because it prevents the man himself from attaining superhuman, idol status. Instead of appearing hypocritical or ineffective, Lippi’s honest observations of the Church create a window through which he can judge the world for himself. He discloses the hidden, visceral philosophies of the clergy on the walls of their inner sanctum and he is reduced by society to the moral level of a spider.

## Chapter Two

## Idols of the Cave:

## Cultural Iconoclasm in "The Statue and the Bust,"

"Bishop Blougram's Apology," and "Saul"

*Present your own perfection, your ideal,*

*Your pattern man for a minute—oh, make haste,*

[.....]

*Have we aught in our sober night shall point*

*Such ends as his were, and direct the means*

*Of working out our purpose straight as his,*

*Nor bring a moment's trouble on success*

*With after-care to justify the same?*

[.....]

*Can I mistake for some clear word of God*

*(Which were my ample warrant for it all)*

*His puff of hazy instinct, idle talk*

*("Bishop Blougram's Apology" 434-35, 438-52, 463-65)*

More than leaders' false philosophies stand in the way of an individual's original interpretation of the world. "The Idols of the Cave" are the idols of humanity's perception; the shadows filling the cave are the images of accepted conceptions and worldviews that hide reality. These images prevent individuals from truly exploring their own caves and clearly seeing the world through their environment. "The Idols of the

Cave” often take the form of cultural milieu to which the majority of society blindly adheres.

One of the best examples of “Idols of the Cave” is “The Statue and the Bust,” in which people solidify their own culturally-bound personas into human idols. The Duke and Riccardi’s bride meet and fall in love, but in their obedience to societal restraints, they never run away together, but only gaze at each other across the plaza. Browning’s social iconoclasm is present in this poem as the lovers tragically accept their social education, which keeps them from a true understanding of themselves. The lovers begin to grow old, so they each have their image made in clay to “[fix] a beauty never to fade” (168), and they are fixed in their usual positions: the lady at the window watching, and the Duke riding by on his horse.

The lady and the Duke remain nameless throughout the poem, and lose their identity behind their station. The female is locked into roles she cannot escape: the lady, the wife, the daughter, and the lover. She stays in her marriage, despite her unhappiness, for her father’s sake. She agrees to stay true to her role as lady and wife, and tells her husband she chooses to see the world through his window. Through this process, she becomes stagnant in her inaction. She watches for her lover “like a book / Holding one picture and only one” (145-46). The lady realizes she never acted on her desires, never truly lived:

Where is the use of the lip’s red charm,  
The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow,  
And the blood that blues the inside arm—

Unless we turn, as the soul knows how,

The earthly gift to an end divine?

A lady of clay is as good, I trow. (181-86)

Even when she is talking of preserving her figure into art, it is clear that she has already begun to see herself as merely the artist's rendering of a classically beautiful woman. She has entirely lost her identity and has nothing left of herself to preserve.

In the end, the Duke's and the lady's inaction is what keeps them in a sin against their own natures. The social and religious constructs are so tightly woven that the two lovers are trapped in them. Their characters, bound to their obedience to the culture, are but idols to the culture, their humanity and individuality drained to leave merely their clay behind. Although the Duke and lady may seem a deviation from Browning's typical treatment of couples, their love is also doomed. They are constrained because of the society in which they live, but also because of their own personal inaction. Rather than judging the characters by a moral system, the narrator claims that they sinned against their nature: "And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost / Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin" (246-47). These lines call to mind Luke 12.35-36, warning Christians to "let your loins be girded about your lights burning" in preparation for the second coming of Christ. However, "ungirt loin" could point toward another interpretation. Although the lady and the Duke are sexually moral, they are still sinning. The lady points out that she has not been true to the way she was created; she has not turned an "earthly gift to an end divine" (185). The Parable of the Talents thus takes on an intriguing, sexual implication.



Unused youthful love and beauty will be taken away. Ironically, the lady and the Duke perhaps would have lived the lives they were meant to if they had girded their loins by ungirding them. The narrator turns the moral of the story on the reader in the last line: “You of the virtue (we issue join) / How strive you? *De te, fabula*” (249-50). The readers are thus implicated in blind observance of social codes. The readers’ statutes come crashing to the ground.

Browning has several characters that appear conventional, but Browning’s artistry is in their struggling against and within that type. Every reader approaches a text with elaborate encyclopedic knowledge of the characters he or she has encountered before. Such personas, often the embodied icons of traditional aspects of our society or religion, resemble what Jung describes as the archetypes that inescapably form human perception. Even the artist is controlled by unseen mental schemas and barred from creating a new and free idea: “The poet’s conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along” (74). Breaking through such characters, or having those characters break through themselves, is one way of censuring society or religion as a whole, and of breaking the idols of convention therein. Taking such types and pulling them apart until the seams almost burst, Browning gives readers a true glimpse into that character type and the society that furthers it.

Bishop Blougram is such a character. The construct of the poem is of an unusual defense from the bishop to a reporter, Gigadibs. Blougram describes the negotiation between spirituality (which is full of doubts) and materialism in his life as a bishop. The

imagery emerges again and again, supporting Blougram's means of gaining spiritual freedom—a means that requires a lowering of idealism: “And the body gets its sop and holds its noise / And leaves soul free a little” (19-20). However, Gigadibs believes that spiritual freedom can be attained only by openly expressing the degree of belief or doubt one feels: “Believed or disbelieved, no matter what, / So long as on that point, whate'er it was, / You loosed your mind, were whole and sole yourself” (56-58). “Sole yourself” could mean to sell yourself to something or to soul yourself, to determine by yourself the nature of your theology and soul. Gigadibs assumes that this kind of religious freedom cannot be found in Blougram's situation, one in which his deepest creed does not exactly match his proclaimed beliefs as church leader.

However, Blougram argues that theology is self-created, something arranged on a personal level and not necessarily always applicable to an outward expression of religion. In this case, Blougram taps into the idea of Bacon's “Idols of the Cave,” the problems of human perception, only to use the argument for his own ends. As a bishop, Blougram's very job is physically to embody spiritual leadership, and his individualized interpretation of spirituality would not be welcome or beneficial to the institution of the Church. However, he argues that changing his perspective from idealistic to realistic has allowed him to attain his goals, whereas idealism can only end in frustration. Instead of trying to have an absolute faith, he “overhaul[s] theology” (156). Blougram realizes the world is perspective-based and he applies that philosophy to religion. He asks Gigadibs:

Like you this Christianity or not?

It may be false, but will you wish it true?

Has it your vote to be so if it can?

[.....]

If you desire faith—then you've faith enough:

What else seeks God—nay what else seek ourselves? (627-29, 634-25)

Like John in "A Death in the Desert" ("to test man, the proofs shift" [295]), Blougram sees the world as a test of a Christian's belief because "it's meant to hide him [God] all it can / And that's what all the blessed evil's for" (653-54). He feels that if the truth is so hard to pin down, then an individual interpretation of theology is inescapable and thus, should be accepted. However, in Blougram's pragmatism, he chooses to stay on the safe side—to "State the facts, / Read the text right, emancipate the world" (581-82), and then ask for the tithe. For him a "right" reading of theology or the Bible gives an interpretation to the masses that they expect and desire instead of opening the text before them with all its grey areas. "Read[ing] the text right" distorts Blougram's individual interpretation of it and suppresses his own beliefs for the purpose of reaping the monetary benefits of a "right" reading. Blougram is willing to lose his interpretive freedom because of his greed.

Blougram realizes the falsity of his actions, but he sees all the world as being full of such inherent falsehood. Man's truth is such an unattainable, shifting beast to him that he sees no choice but to fall comfortably into a prescribed social/religious role and make the best of it, to "read the text right." Blougram demonstrates the inherent falsehood of language through his use of story telling and his references to images and acting. His language is full of parable-like stories and suppositions, one of which he refers to as an

“image” (220). He often refers back to the idea of acting a part or making a character, such as a description of the dangers Gigadibs envisions in Blougram as Pope. Blougram claims that “The naked life is gross till clothed upon” (329), and that he is “a beast” whose “business is not to remake” himself (349, 354). However, he does remake himself by falling into a prescribed character role. When Gigadibs still disagrees with Blougram’s philosophy, the Bishop presses Gigadibs (“Present your own perfection, your ideal” [434]) and then lists Napoleon or Shakespeare as “right” models. The point Blougram makes with this line of argument is that despite the beauty and strength of such historic models, their motivations are still the same as his. Blougram would rather be a rich character Shakespeare dreamed about than a poor, dreaming playwright. Faith and disbelief are also both forms of acting, as Blougram points out to Gigadibs:

Do then,—act away!

’Tis there I’m on the watch for you. How one acts

Is, both of us agree, our chief concern:

And how you’ll act is what I fain would see

If, like the candid person you appear,

You dare to make the most of your life’s scheme

As I of mine, live up to its full law

Since there’s no higher law that counterchecks.

Put natural religion to the test [...]. (811-19)

Although the real issue is of faith or doubt, the only representation of them is through acting and pretense. Blougram strives through this argument to make Gigadibs see

himself as acting, but for different reasons and motivations, and that instead of the black-and-white world Gigadibs envisions, reality is a matter of degrees. Gigadibs's unreligion is his religion; Blougram points out that all the employments Gigadibs sees as more noble than Blougram's are also chained to their icons and false realities: "A zealot with a mad ideal in reach [...] An artist whose religion is his art should have nothing to object" (936-40). This constant use of images, characters, and parables satirizes mankind as bestial. Furthermore, in a theatrical world, real reactions and ulterior motives—such as Blougram's avarice—are misread.

Such a view of humanity as Browning's is perhaps a function of the "hell-deep instincts" Blougram exhibits (990) and promotes in order to portray the truth as lies and lies as the truth: "He said true things, but called them by wrong names" (996). Thus, Blougram becomes the worst kind of idol: a human-embodied idol of religion and of Bacon's "Idols of the Theatre," false philosophies. Bacon refers to Revelation 2.24, which refers to "the depth or profoundness of Satan" (Bacon 26), as a model for power-hungry false teachers. Gigadibs cannot live in Blougram's world, a world of mirrors in which "only the intellectually élite can discuss theology without risk to their souls" (Shaw 456), so he leaves for Australia to farm and read the Bible. He escapes the misnamed, false world seen through—and in—Blougram's eyes to live a simple life he can (try to) control. Such an ending does not censure Blougram as a Christian failure as much as it demonizes him for his casuistry. Becoming an idol of the social or religious realm, allowing the world to define the character he chooses to play, is the most harmful approach to life because living someone else's image of reality keeps Blougram from

ever experiencing a true, individual reality.

Although he “read[s] the text right” (582) for the purpose of his job, Blougram redefines what is right on his own terms. He cannot express his true, complete reading of the world because many of his ideas remain in his “hell-deep instincts,” which are beyond the grasp of his tongue. Perhaps to interpret the world correctly, it is necessary to slip into the coarse, uneven nature of our souls and use whatever instincts we find to “read the text right”—right for us each individually. Fra Lippo Lippi also plays at the “devil’s-game” (178) in his pictorial re-creation of monastery life when he displays the truth. This is more than a simple theological or social iconoclasm, but it is a complete denial of everything outside of our own Truth and a fundamental dedication to read our own text. Like Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” the Bible must be read in “its infernal or diabolical sense” (4.289) to reach a fusion of the breadth of its message and the orthodox interpretation of it. Reading the Bible in “its infernal or diabolical sense” means walking the thin line of interpretation; on one side is orthodoxy, on the other, spiritual death. The “hell-deep instincts” (990) are not a disengagement from God, but a renegotiation of God’s teachings to man. Through marrying reason and instinct, man is made whole.

The last lines of the poem test the readers to form their own right reading: “By this time, he has tested his first plough, / And studied his last chapter of St. John” (1013-14). Gigadibs and the reader are balancing between orthodoxy and spiritual death. Gigadibs might have finished reading the whole Bible, or he might have quit reading it altogether. He might be avidly studying John’s writings, or he might have also given up

reading John's works because of the controversies surrounding them or his own rejection of Christianity. Such ambiguity illustrates the slipperiness of interpretation. The message, indeterminacy, surfaces when the readers consider all interpretive possibilities. At the same time, a central Truth remains (Blougram's psyche) which readers can slowly interpret, but never truly discover. Likewise, according to Browning's belief of the duplicity of truth, man's truth, i.e. the Bible, cannot fully represent God's Truth, but can only allow the readers to glimpse it.

The nineteenth century was a time of change in the interpretation of the Bible. The avid desire for absolute knowledge in the scientific fields trickled into other aspects of study: "The general success achieved in the physical sciences led scholars in other fields to seek the same objective certitude that was available in the sciences" (Keegan 20). The rise in scientific studies and rationalistic thought altered the Bible in the academic mindset from the Word of God to a text to be studied and questioned. Among the other scholars in the study of biblical hermeneutics was David Strauss, who "introduced the concept of myth into New Testament analysis as a way of explaining the seemingly historical, but really non-historical, modes of expression used especially by the Gospel writers" (Keegan 21). Strauss questioned whether it would be possible to ascertain a historical conception of Jesus, and, in the end, decided it was not (Keegan 21). Strauss was a presence in Browning's life from his childhood, when his father introduced the subject to him, to his own poetic interest in hermeneutics (Maynard, Browning's 89, 309). In the poems of Dramatis Personae, Browning sought to establish his own beliefs about how to "read the text right" (Blougram 582) that denied both nineteenth-century

historical and textual interpretations of the Bible (by authors like Strauss) and a fundamentalist view that opposed scholarly investigations of the Bible (Maynard, Browning's 309). Browning's religious upbringing and the influence of Unitarianism through W. J. Fox encouraged a critical reading of the Bible, which led to his own later study of the Bible becoming "less a matter of textual and historical investigation than a broad and undoctinaire appreciation of its moral and religious insights" (Maynard, Browning's 309).

Browning's use of biblical stories in his poems reveals this "undoctinaire" approach. Apparently, he did not see Scripture as fixed Truth, but filled with fluid puddles of Truth that, when combined, flood the reader with a fuller understanding of the nature of God. This interpretive philosophy follows his belief in the duality of truth; ideally, man's truth leads to God's. This rearrangement of Scripture is a kind of iconoclasm that rejects the traditional, orthodox reading of the Bible and seeks instead to break up the well-worn patterns of the stories to reveal God anew. Myths can be very dangerous because they often become their own brand of religion, or idols within the religion. Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher, argued in the eighteenth century that myths reflect the way people respond to nature, and their stories become the culture's history (22). In his view of myths, an instinctual response to the world becomes narrative, which hardens into history. Because every person does not create his or her own myths, but merely alters existing myths to shape individual responses to the world, existing myth and history play a big role in the later generations' initial perception of the world. Myth replaces reality, as the Platonic shadows on the wall become more real than



the spiritual reality they represent. Within that system, the Christian must become iconoclastic when reading the Bible in order to find a primal response to God.

Browning attempts to reach that ideal in his poetry by stripping away the mythology of the Bible and breaking the traditional typology. "Saul" is an example of this kind of revision. By changing the way the Old Law and the New are defined, Browning breaks down a few myths and causes the reader to think about David and the Bible in a new way. Typology, which involves interpreting the Bible according to the types within it leading to Christ's death and resurrection, can be spiritually prescriptive and severely limiting to the individuality of the characters in the Bible, as well as the interpretation of the Bible. The word type comes from the Greek word typos, which means "an impression, a figure, a type; the root of 'to beat, strike'" ("Type"). Pressing out on the world around it to create an absence of space, a type is an impression waiting to be filled. In terms of typology, a type is "a person, object, or event of Old Testament history, prefiguring some person or thing revealed in the new dispensation; correlating to antitype" ("Type," def. 1a). An antitype is not the opposite of a type, but the fulfillment of it, or "that which is shadowed forth or represented by the 'type' or symbol" ("Antitype," def. 1). So, the Old Testament type is the model that provides the space needed for the antitype to fill. "Type needs antitype" (Parleyings "With Francis Furini" 483). Like Plato's forms, the types are the copies and the antitype, Christ, is the fulfillment of those types--the spiritual ideal ("Typology"). However, the types themselves can be idols. They can become disengaged from their antitype, Christ, and worshipped individually and they can also create too constrictive a mold for Christ. The

word typos is used many times in the New Testament with many different connotations, including representative models (1 Pet. 5.3) and graven images (Acts 7.43) (“Typology”). Browning alters the common typology of Saul and David through the imagery of “Saul” and thus breaks the idols of type, freeing antitype to a fresh interpretation.

As the poem opens, an intermediary welcomes David, and the readers, to Saul’s tent, where Saul has been fighting his demons and awaiting David’s musical salve. The imagery is filled with mystery and with biblical references. It is quickly evident that whatever strange event the readers are about to witness is momentous, both to the lives of Saul and David, and to the course of Christianity. The poem, in fact, draws an imaginary line between Saul and David, dividing biblical history into the Old Law and the New. This line is typically drawn between the Old and New Testament, with the birth of Jesus as the point of separation. In Matthew, Jesus explains “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (5.17). Jesus then elucidates that while it is important to obey the biblical law, it is even more important to keep your heart in line with the spirit of the law. In other words, Jesus’s invocation of the New Law means that intent is as important as actions, if not more so. Browning, however, connects the beginning of the New Law with David, who, despite his varied and monumental indiscretions, is still described by Old Testament leaders as a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13.14). After he is made king, David breaks the Law, but maintains an intense love for and dedication to God. He tries to be the best man and best king he can be, and that is enough; his heart is praised in the Bible over his actions.

The fissure between the New and Old Law occurs poetically in the relationship between Saul and David. Browning hints at the difference between intent and action by the placement of the first character, Abner. According to the Old Testament, Saul disobeys God's command to kill all of the Amalekites and destroy their possessions; he decides instead to keep the best of their livestock (1 Sam. 15.9). This disobedience accentuates Saul's lust for power and dedication to legalism only when it serves his purposes. The opening lines of the poem, spoken by Abner, the general of the army, highlight the real cause of God's anger toward Saul. He tells David that no one has had food or water since Saul asked for David, and he hopes that all goes well between David and Saul, that everyone's "lip[s] with the honey [will] be bright" (6). Immediately before the fight against the Amalekites in I Samuel, Saul tells his army not to eat any honey until he has avenged his enemies. Jonathan, Saul's son, does not get the message, and eats some honey he finds on the ground, and "his eyes brighten" (14.27). When he is told of his father's order, he responds by saying that the men need honey for energy and that his father "has made trouble for the country" (14.29). Saul then feels bound to have Jonathan killed because Jonathan broke his commandment. Much like Abraham and Isaac, Saul is willing to sacrifice his son; however, he is not bending to a command of God, but to his own meaningless legalism. Jonathan is spared, however, by the troops who respect his fighting and leadership skills. So Saul is willing to obey the letter of his created law, even to the point of murdering his own son, but he is unwilling to obey God's commands. Abner's presence at the beginning of the poem mentioning honey sets David up as the enemy Saul is facing and the people's hope for salvation. Blue lilies

assert David as the natural king, as blue sapphires burden the head of the national king. Like the Israelites in the desert, the people cry out for honey, for the Promised Land, for a New Law based on the worshipper's heart.

The imagery of Saul in the tent also accentuates the change that is occurring and connects it with the Crucifixion of Christ, the traditional pinnacle moment of change in the New Testament. Saul is in the "black mid-tent's silence" (7), a place that evokes the image of a priest in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Jewish temple, especially at the time of the Crucifixion, when "darkness [comes] over the land" (Mark 15.33). This dark place is also very much like a womb where rebirth is taking place, similar to what Julia Kristeva describes as a "chora," or a womb-like space of central truth that escapes the impositions of the physical or cultural world (26). Saul has been in the tent for three days, and when David approaches the tent, he opens the foldskirts, much as the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple splits at the moment of Jesus's death (Mark 15.38). The tent's center pole is like a cross, with Saul agonizing on it with his "arms stretched out wide / On the great cross-support" (28-29). The prophetic imagery that moves throughout the Bible in a cyclical pattern toward Christ's life and death is imitated in "Saul." Saul is hanging between worlds while the Old Law changes into the New, much as Christ does during the three days after His death. Saul is compared to a snake that begins to shed its skin for a new season, and at the end of the poem, that snake slithers away, aware of the new change. The snake imagery is repeated in Matthew when Jesus is talking about the blind legalism of the Pharisees: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. [...] You snakes! You brood of

vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (23.24, 33) Jesus refers to the Pharisees' legalism and heartless worship of God as what will keep them from heaven. So, the Old Law is not changed into the New Law, but is supposed to grow into it. Jesus's teachings are the culmination of that growth into the New Law. In "Saul," the change between the New Law and the Old is drastic. The biblical imagery, giving momentum and precedence to Browning's philosophy about Love and Power, sets David and Saul against each other as fundamentally different leaders.

The traditional typological connection between David, Saul, and Jesus is altered as the types intermix in the scene in the tent. Although David is the more obvious type of Christ, Saul is the one described as if hanging on a cross:

For the reader, whom Browning expects to be versed in biblical typology, the picture and David's interpretation of it mean more than David knows. Saul's posture makes him a type of Christ on the cross, but because Saul is only a type, we know that the posture may prefigure but it lacks both the meaning and the efficacy of its antitype. (Hair 160)

Saul looks down at David as Jesus later looks down at Mary Magdalene. As Jonah, another type of Christ, is imprisoned in the fish for three days, Saul is imprisoned in the tent. David is an Adam-like figure (also an type of Christ) after his epiphany. Like Adam at the end of Paradise Lost, David looks out over the world with changed vision. As Christ ripped the veil of the temple in half in the Bible, David pulls back the foldskirts in "Saul." However, instead of finding a clear, spiritual truth, David finds Saul positioned as Christ on the cross in the middle of the tent. Every time a type is extricated

from the text, it becomes so entangled that it loses its connection to the antitype. The figural aspects of the type are muddled, the metaphors incomplete at best.

Saul is such an unfitting type of Christ, especially in terms of his legalistic relationship with God, also emphasized in “Saul,” that readers are forced to reconsider their antitype (interpretation) of Browning’s type (the poem). Browning is not alone in representing Saul’s inadequacy as a type of Christ. Saul is conspicuously missing from such typological catalogues as Edward Taylor’s Upon the Types of the Old Testament. However, as a type, Saul is biblically linked to Christ. He is God’s anointed king in I Samuel. The Hebrew adjective for “anointed one” is meshiach, from which the English word messiah is derived (Willis 19). The Greek word for meshiach is christos, from which the English word Christ is derived (Willis 19). “Both the Lord (I Sam. 9.16) and Samuel (10.1) declare that Saul is anointed as ‘prince’ [...] and not ‘king’ over Israel” (Willis 19), a position reserved for Christ. This relationship is even more troubling in the biblical story in which David plays the harp for Saul because Saul uses the excuse of his demons to lure David to his palace in order to gain the opportunity to kill David. A similar image is invoked in Browning’s poem through Saul’s simultaneous characteristics of agony and cold power. Saul might not be truly suffering as he says he is; ironically, David’s prophecy comes from his sympathy for pain Saul might not be feeling.

Browning often uses types disruptively to force the reader to interpret the meaning of the situations he creates in his poetry:

His long poems also depict characters by means both of these figures' self-conscious distortion of types for dishonest ends and of their apparently

unconscious citation of such biblical images. [...] In others, the authority exists, as it were, in the correct usually the traditional, readings of the type. Of course, when Browning uses a typological image which traditionally possesses several antitypes or interpretations, then he puts the reader, like his characters, to the test. (Landow N. pag.)

The types disconnect from their usual association to the antitype and so Christ takes on a new visage. Although the types cannot have a one-to-one relationship with Christ because unlike Him, they are human, Browning manipulates the symbolism of types to alter the correspondence many typological interpreters take for granted. The struggle between David and Saul is both creative and destructive. In their relationship in the poem, types reform to create a new type (and thus a new antitype), but their biblical relationship is based on deceit and attempted murder. David crawls in the womb of spiritual rebirth in the tent and combines with Saul and other biblical types to create a new image of Christ, and “the face into which Saul looks is a prefiguring of the Incarnation” (Hair 161). However, a renewed David emerges alone. He is the authorial force who records the moment through prophecy.

There is a specific point at which the change happens, the music stops, and David begins to prophesy. This moment of change is when Saul grabs David’s face and looks into it. In 1 Samuel, Saul tries to kill David by throwing a spear at him while he plays the harp (19.9). Browning’s Saul runs his fingers through David’s hair and pulls his head back, in a movement full of sexuality and power, for which the spear that appears in I Samuel is an apt symbol (19.10). In the 1 Samuel version, when Saul’s men reach for

David's hair to pull him out of bed and kill him by Saul's order, they find only goat's hair attached to an idol. Michal, David's wife and Saul's daughter, warned David to escape before Saul could have him killed. (19.1-17). Thus, the poem echoes images from the biblical story, but changes their configuration and their meaning. In "Saul," David immediately responds to Saul's demonstration of power with love for him and he begins to prophesy about God's intense love for man and need to demonstrate it. Jesus is the figure that embodies that love and connects man to the all-powerful God. In this way, David and Saul join Jesus and God as the representations of Browning's ideal of the split between Love and Power.

Browning deviates from 1 Samuel, in which Saul prophesies instead of David. In 1 Samuel, after Saul tries to kill David, the Spirit of God comes upon him (as opposed to the evil spirit of the Lord for which he needs David's musical exorcism in the first place) and he walks to the place where Samuel lives, where Saul strips and lies down for a day (19.23-24). This is the second time Saul prophesies in the Bible, and both times his countrymen respond with incredulity: "This is why people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'" (19.24) Saul seems to be regarded so differently than the truly Godly men that his prophesying signals tremendous changes in the spiritual guidance of the country. The first prophesy takes place after Saul is made king, and the second occurs as Saul is losing his kingdom to David. Saul's second prophecy is one of hopelessness. Although the message of his prophecy is not revealed, he is naked and has recently suffered the disloyalty and deceit of his children, Jonathan and Michal, when they allow his rival, David, to escape. He is the dying power symbol of Israel, who, soon after, kills himself.



While Saul cannot force obedience, David inspires love. Even Saul's children prefer David. David's prophecy in "Saul" is full of hope and renewal. He realizes the balance of power and love as he recognizes his own ability to love and willingness to suffer ("Would I suffer for him that I love? / So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!" [300-01]). The biblical Saul was neither able to feel this kind of love nor have this kind of prophecy. He was an ancient of the Old Law, entrenched in the uncompromising spirit of its rules and its God. He would rather die than see that world fade away into the light of the New Law, which Browning's David beckons in new understanding of the nature of God. David does prophecy often in the Bible about the coming of Christ. However, his prophecies do not occur when Saul is living. Browning's purpose in tacking a new prophecy of David at the end of the poem (instead of remaining true to the story in I Samuel) is to bring together his version of the Old and New Laws, which coincides with his beliefs about God and Jesus as representing Power and Love. The revision of Saul and David represents the change in Christianity that brings hope and fully reconciles man to God. By calling the poem "Saul," Browning highlights what has passed in order to cast even greater light on what is to come, while severing the easy connections of idolatrous typology. He sums up the story of Saul and closes the chapter of the Old Law as he sees it as he re-creates the New Law.

As Saul begins to die, the letter of the Old Law dies with him, a law focused on a God of Power, and David begins to move into his place as king of Israel, with the New Law springing up, a law focused on the heart's intent and moving toward Jesus's teachings and sacrifice of Love. As in the story of the Crucifixion, all of nature responds

to the change. The snake, the spokesperson of the law's rigidity revealed (yet exaggerated) to Eve in the Garden of Eden, "slid away silent—he felt the new law" (331). True to Browning's philosophy about perfection in imperfection, David is the one to call the New Law into being. Though he will later destroy his family through his mistakes, he will maintain his aspirations to be a faithful worshipper of God. His failure will not have to wait, like Saul's, to be changed into glory in the afterlife, but he will develop a relationship with God that allows for constant renewal and an imperfect perfection of heart. David's prophecy opens the spiritual world to everyone; just as David rips open the Old Law to find the New, so Browning claims the spirit of the Scripture as his own:

By coupling David's orphic glimpse of divine love with God's revealed "truth," Browning evokes his persona's spiritual zeal ("grace . . . sufficient") and new poetical expertise (God-spell, sacramental expression). [...] The "new law" is not enacted by David; rather, this universal Here, everlasting Now, literally dis-covers itself to him for the first time. (Dupras, "Sacramental" 129-30)

After Saul has been sacrificed, like Jesus, to fulfill the demands of the God of the Old Law, the New Law can come into being. However, the traditional typology must also be sacrificed through the types of Saul and David for that New Law to be truly new.

Browning's change to the story, while it seems insignificant, displaces the power from Saul and gives it to David, while redefining both types. In this way, the Bible is broken virtually in half. Instead of following progressively toward Jesus and leaning on a system of details and prophecies, the meaning is placed firmly on the nature and the

purpose of Christ. He also breaks apart the system of typology and re-creates the relationships between Saul, David, and Christ. Through the written word, Browning breaks the types and allows the story to breathe:

High, O Printing, and holy

Thy mission! These types, see, I chop and I change

Till the words, every letter, a pageful, not slowly

Yet surely lies fixed: last of all, I arrange

A paper beneath, stamp it, loosen it!

(“Fust and His Friends: An Epilogue” 356-60)

Browning’s words become new types by which to interpret the antitype, both in terms of the message of “Saul” and the person of Christ. Thus the process of interpretation is doubled, existing on a poetic and spiritual plane, as the reader must find a way to piece together the broken idols in the poem to understand what they represent: “If human words are types of the Word, then creation is essentially verbal, and prosopopoeia, the trope which animates nature, is not a human attribution [...] but a discovery of the true character of the created universe” (Hair 164). Through the character of David, Browning beckons the reader to join in the destruction and recreation, the typological iconoclasm and reconstitution of an understanding of Christ. Through Browning’s revision in “Saul,” he de-centers Judaism from a system and reveals it as a relationship as he forces his readers to relinquish their prescriptive systems of biblical interpretation, as they interpret the symbolism of his revised types and antitype. Like David, readers may emerge from the tent and notice that their world has changed.

## Chapter Three

## Idols of the Market-Place:

Linguistic Iconoclasm in “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of  
Karshish, the Arab Physician” and “A Death in the Desert”

*Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks*

*Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain,*

*Whereby the wily vapour fain would slip*

*Back and rejoin the source before the term,—*

*And aptest in contrivance (under God)*

*To baffle it by deftly stopping such*

*(“An Epistle . . . of Karshish, the Arab Physician” 9-14)*

Even once the idols of philosophy and culture have been removed, the problem of the indeterminacy of language still remains, blocking the individual from true communication. “The Idols of the Market-Place” highlight the problems of communication because of the inadequacies of language (Coquillotte 229). This category is by far the most dangerous of all of the idols because it holds that words obscure every aspect of scholarship and learning. To Bacon, the fundamental problem with language is the inherent deceitfulness of it, and the impossibility of the true transmission of an idea. Bacon’s idea of language as duplicitous, like Saussure’s, is that language cannot ever truly express the ideas behind it. The signifier never truly represents the sign: Browning believed “man’s truth is not false because it changes; it changes because it is false—at least false in part” (Crowell, *The Convex* 84). If language is deceitful, the idea of the

Bible as the Word of God is problematic. Browning addresses the issues of transmission primarily in two poems, "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician" and "A Death in the Desert." At the same time, he engages in linguistic iconoclasm; he demonstrates the multi-layered meanings of words and then allows them free play to deconstruct the message: "In order to charge his audience with reviewing theology and poetry more intelligently, he turns writing inside out to disclose articulation, and he upsets reading to encourage uncertainty" (Dupras, "The Word's" 96). Despite the inherent deceitfulness of language, an individualistic Truth emerges unscathed.

Browning engages in linguistic iconoclasm by revealing and breaking the idol of language, especially language that purports to explain Truth. In "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," the speaker is a physician who tries to explain an encounter with Lazarus that threatens his spiritual beliefs. In "A Death in the Desert," the speaker is John, arguably the writer of a Gospel, three epistles, and Revelation, who must try to defend his religion and his teachings to his followers. In both poems, the speakers pull their monologues as taut as possible and the truth begins to emerge in the cracks. Karshish characterizes himself and Abib, both physicians, as being "inquisitive how pricks and cracks / Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain" (9-10). The physician's goal is to stop the "wily vapour" (11) from "rejoining the source before the term" (12). Likewise, the reader's goal is to peer into the "pricks and cracks" of language to see the Truth pouring through. Browning's use of the monologue creates layers that the reader must peel back to see the world as it is

portrayed through the speaker's persona. In "A Death in the Desert," the same cracks are evident. John claims that it is impossible to know the Truth on earth because the fundamental nature of being human is remaining in spiritual ignorance and through that ignorance, having a truly free will:

While were it so with the soul—this gift of truth,  
 Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure  
 To prosper as the body's gain is wont—  
 Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth  
 Crumble; for he both reasons and decides,  
 Weighs first, then chooses: will he give up fire  
 For gold or purple, once he knows its worth?  
 Could he give Christ up were his worth as plain?  
 Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift [...]. (287-95)

In this shifting environment, man must try to ascertain the Truth. Browning engages in linguistic iconoclasm in "An Epistle ... of Karshish, the Arab Physician" by allowing the Christian doctrine to surface in the language of a man who openly denies its truth. Karshish's language is deceitful in that it deconstructs his message. The reader can conclude either that Karshish actually does believe in Christianity, but is not able to admit it, or that, regardless of Karshish's beliefs, a spiritual force controls the message in any epistle account of a Biblical character like Lazarus.

"An Epistle ... of Karshish, the Arab Physician" is a letter from Karshish, "the picker-up of learning's crumbs" (1), to Abib, his mentor in the medical field. Karshish

struggles with putting his experience with Lazarus into his scientific perception of the world:

Tension arises from his coercing a remarkable medical experience into neat formulas, but not explaining the most enigmatic aspects of Lazarus's condition suitably. Language has to answer his expanding spiritual and perceptual sensibilities. As he struggles for and gains greater insight, figurative descriptions supersede scientific locutions. (Dupras, "Writing" 7)

At the same time, the Christian message inadvertently surfaces through his language both in the story he describes and in the words themselves. As this happens, the message of the poem opens up and becomes at "cross-purposes" (158) with itself. Browning breaks apart the language by pulling it in different directions and revealing the multiplicity of meaning in phrases that are both secular and Christian at the same time:

Browning approached [past literature] in [the] context [...] of the dissenting religious tradition in which he was brought up, and Puritanism, as understood by the Congregationalists (the particular denomination to which the Brownings belonged), gives the use of language a moral and spiritual purpose and language itself a double character: words are, on the one hand, empty and foolish, windy things that reflect a fallen humanity; on the other, they are the means of our hard-fought return to God, and they, like the vanities condemned by the preacher of Ecclesiastes, will ultimately be called in to judgment. (Hair 3)

Readers also have to join Browning's linguistic iconoclasm by breaking the words apart to search for the true meaning of the poem. Having found what they think is the meaning, readers must then apply it to the story as a whole, including the story of Lazarus, which is only found in the Gospel of John, the only non-Synoptic Gospel. The debates surrounding the non-Synoptic Gospel spread to the poem, obscuring the poem as an extra-biblical text even more. Just when the message seems clear, everything must be questioned once again.

Like Lazarus, the poem exists in the fluctuating space between the concrete world of language and the space in which that language dissolves. No language is trustworthy; it is always open to revision and easily lost. Karshish is continuously worried that his letter will not reach Abib as he wrote it, if at all. For Karshish, traveling in itself is dangerous ("Twice have the robbers stripped and beaten me, / And once a town declared me for a spy" [32-33]), and a fragile text is even more susceptible to obscurity in these circumstances. If he trusts the "Syrian runagate" (49) to deliver it, he must consider that his words could be lost altogether. In the end, Karshish decides to attempt to send the letter via the Syrian:

I send thee what is writ.

Regard it as a chance, a matter risked

To this ambiguous Syrian—he may lose,

Or steal, or give it thee with equal good. (297-300)

Karshish's situation emphasizes the hardships of travel and the unreliability of messengers, which, in turn, allows the same issues to arise for the readers when



considering the epistles of the Bible. However, apparently the letter did arrive and if there were any changes, they are not apparent in the text, so there is hope that such a method can be considered somewhat reliable. However, perhaps the historical reliability is not the point in this poem or any Biblical text.

Karshish does not want to believe Lazarus's story and scientifically cannot allow himself by faith to accept a story so outside the realm of rational understanding. However, his language is full of Christian symbolism. The words themselves break through Karshish's inability to believe and declare Christianity anyway. Instead of believing that the indeterminacy of language has to herald the breakdown of Christian belief, Browning demonstrates that there is a Truth that makes itself evident despite language, instead of through it. Karshish's words proclaim the Christian message even as his letter denies the feasibility of its evidence. At the beginning of the poem, Karshish offers Abib "three samples of true snakestone" (17), which are supposed to cure snakebites. In Christian symbolism, he offers a Trinitarian a cure for sin. He proposes to "share with [Abib] whatever Jewry yields" (41), which is a better cure for "falling-sickness" (44) than he had encountered before. This imagery again leads to the Christian message—the Jews have the best cure (Jesus) for the "falling-sickness" (the fall of man).

Karshish's account of Lazarus's case is also full of Christian symbolism. Because Lazarus was dead, or appeared to be, he finds himself mentally caught between the material and spiritual worlds, "fixed in middle life" (126). Unconscious of his language's nuances, Karshish describes Lazarus as Christ-like, i.e., experienced being in both worlds at once. Lazarus's friends lead him to "bear [Karshish's] inquisition" (120) while

Lazarus is “obedient as a sheep” (119). Almost exactly halfway in the body of the letter, a chiasmus occurs, highlighting the hidden Christian message throughout the letter:

Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,

Earth forced on a soul’s use while seeing heaven (141-42)

This chiasmus creates a cross pattern that ties the text around the Christ symbol. Cross imagery also surfaces in the language. Karshish describes Lazarus as being “at cross purposes” when he refuses to react to the world on a physical level (158) and as having an impulse to want to “start off crosswise” (187) when he sees spiritual truth in a way that is often the reverse of the truth of the physical world. Karshish even inadvertently begins quoting Scripture: “He loves both old and young, / Able and weak, affects the very brutes / And birds—how say I? flowers of the field—” (229). These lines call to mind Matthew 6:28, which is a lesson about not remaining steeped in the cares of the physical world: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.” Dupras explains the impact of Lazarus’s Christian message on Karshish:

What happens to the physician in the process of describing this “case of mania” cannot entirely be interpreted as “rationalistic habits” preventing spiritual liberation. Reassessing the scope of “God’s handiwork” overrides his coercive intellectual faculties. Although no formal religious conversion occurs, “the infinite moment of divine revelation” does have obvious spiritual and perceptual impact. (“Writing” 13)

In a letter in which he denies Christianity and calls Lazarus “stark mad” (265), he also presents a full sermon containing the message of Christianity.

“An Epistle . . . of Karshish, the Arab Physician” demonstrates both the fear of wrong transmission because text fluctuates and, at the same time, a philosophical truth transmitting itself between the “pricks and cracks” (9) Karshish investigates. The Christian message could be surfacing in Karshish’s words because it is already in his heart, although he will not allow it in his mind. Or, despite Karshish, the message could be transmitting itself, as evidence that the spirit of God actually controls the words and no manipulation of them can destroy the true message. Because this poem is about Lazarus and its source, the Gospel of John, is questionable, the layers of indeterminacy thicken. Not only do the words themselves stretch to mean more than they are intended, if the intention can be ascertained, but also the poem is about a Biblical story that might not have historically occurred and is recorded in a Gospel not based on the same sources as the other Gospels. Browning thus gives the reader the ability to delve into the stories represented in the Bible instead of merely accepting their representations in it:

Reading “An Epistle . . . of Karshish, the Arab Physician,” “Cleon,” and especially “A Death in the Desert,” we not only witness distant phonographic religious experiences but also have an occasion to proofread the Word, to check varieties of spiritual persuasion, and to save the scriptible text. (Dupras, “The Word’s” 95).

By creating another source that contains an account of Lazarus, Browning creates his own canon while calling attention to hermeneutic issues and the viability of belief despite the evidence against it. In the poem, the deceitfulness of language also helps it to transmit the Christian Truth. Through Karshish’s language, Browning breaks the idol of

language, especially our supposed control over it, while he allows the Truth to emerge from the broken bits.

“A Death in the Desert” deals even more powerfully with the indeterminacy of language and subject of faith in and through the Bible. Browning deviates even further from the Bible in this story, creating an extra-biblical text using one of the apostles as his primary character. John, whose scriptural role is close to supreme, is dying in the desert and reflecting on his life as an apostle. His few disciples crowd around his dying body, wary of being caught by Rome, and listen to his last words. What will be added to the canon of this man’s life? What more can be said? How can they but feast on his body and blood until it runs dry, using his knowledge a source of communion with Jesus, with no other sources of true contact with Jesus left? They are truly in the desert, wandering, looking for the Promised Land, searching for some sign from God that they are not wandering in vain, that He is real. Browning uses this opportunity to express some of his own revisionary theology through John by interweaving the Bible, John, and the poem. Through the new resulting text, Browning breaks down a stagnant religion that has resulted from Biblical language being turned into an idol. By dismissing rote learning and redefining the nature of God and Christian faith, Browning models the kind of linguistic iconoclasm Christians must engage in to use the Bible as a tool to know God instead of worshipping the Bible as a god itself.

One important aspect of Browning’s choice of John as the main character is that John has already expressed inspired opinions about the possible problems with God and faith and their textual representation. John does not, however, express in “A Death in the

Desert” the same confidence with which he ends Revelation, which leaves no room for doubt of its truth or of the solidarity of the Word:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev. 22.18-19; emphasis added)

This warning assumes that the text is alive and intimately linked to God. The verses tie the prophetic feature of Revelation to an oral tradition while they deny the inherent fluidity of an oral tradition. After all, taking away or adding to the words in the book can mean eternal death. So, a certain kind of Truth is implied, one that can pass from mouth to mouth unhindered and unchanged. According to the warning, the consequences of tampering with this Truth are even more concrete because they involve concepts that are written. The warning’s wording keeps the Judeo-Christian tradition, based on the importance of the word but primarily transmitted orally, in a combination of spiritual and physical reality. The book itself has an integral and complementary relationship with the soul; changes made to the book will negatively impact a soul’s eternal life. Even eternal life is embodied in a book, a book in which the individual is a page. Where does human frailty fit into such a system that expects perfection (at the risk of eternal death) in the human transmission of words? According to Revelation, revision is dangerous.

However, Browning is willing to risk ignoring these warnings to “read the text right”

(“Bishop Blougram’s Apology” 582)—even if it means reading the text wrong—to understand the Bible on his own terms. Because he believes in a duality of Truth, man’s truth can be compromised, the Bible’s words can be disassembled, to reach the Truth of God.

John seems well aware of the inadequacies of writing about God for man. Before Christianity was a somewhat organized religion (and even after), there was no real way to keep the facts straight. John claims that he tried to clarify the truths of Christ’s life: “patient stated much of the Lord’s life / Forgotten or misdelivered” (166-67). However, even John’s intimate relationship with Christ is somewhat disconnected from an uncomplicated one-to-one transference of truth: “I, whom Christ’s mouth taught” (135). This metonymic phrase implies a distancing through the process of dispersion. “Christ’s mouth” taught John, instead of simply Christ. Truth, even when transmitted from Christ, still has to leave his mouth, enter the minds of his audience, be reformed into their words, be read by their audience, understood according to their audience’s perception, etc.

Dupras explains an underlying message of the poem:

Oral testimony, testaments (old or new), and revelations do not reduce the interpretive load for believers and doubters. The spoken Word is liable to be garbled and misconstrued while passing among mouths and ears. An extant text, whether scriptural or poetic, only invites repeated analysis. Furthermore, important written or printed religious texts perhaps are misplaced, miscopied, or misinterpreted. (“The Word’s” 106)

Throughout the poem, John seems to separate Truth from teaching. Even if the Truth can

be disseminated as accurately as humanly possible, words cannot express spiritual Truth accurately.

Browning's John is in a middle point between life and death, between the spiritual and the physical, and perhaps for the first time, he is realizing that words actually do not have the spiritual significance or ability to represent reality the way he thought they did. The poem begins with John, asleep at noon while his followers try to wake him, perhaps closer to the spiritual world than physical reality. Words and their meanings fade in the noon light:

Yet now I wake in such decrepitude  
 As I have slidden down and fallen afar,  
 Past even the presence of my former self,  
 Grasping the while for stay at facts which snap. (188-91)

Like Moses descending from Mount Sinai, tablet in hand, John delivers the written word to an uncomprehending world. John realizes that the truth of the Bible lies not in the words, but in the spiritual Truth. Responding to an imagined doubter's disbelief because of factual inaccuracies of the Bible, John claims that the wise cry, "*The fact is in the fable*" (534, sic), and that man is made to progress "from fancies to the fact" (583). In the end, man will know the Truth, "And guesses [will be] changed to knowledge absolute" (591). Reflecting Browning's view that fact is not "a full revelation of truth, [...] [but the] basis for such revelation" (Hyde 94), John claims that we cannot know the Truth now: "Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift" (295). This shifting, undulating representation of Truth is drastically different from the idea of Truth in the

book of Revelation, and hints at the underlying deceitfulness of language.

John's addition in the poem to his own canonical book of prophecy in the Bible approaches heresy. Although John is not directly changing anything written in Revelation, therein, he seems to see the speaking of doctrine to be all one book. In it, an angel asks John to take a book and eat it. The book represents the God-given prophecy to write Revelation itself. The book is supposed to taste sweet but be bitter to the stomach (10.9-11). This imagery of eating the text permeates "A Death in the Desert," in phrases such as "taste the truth of things" (112). However, the connection to the Revelation book John eats is strongest when John tries to enunciate the spiritual reality he knows: "My book speaks on" (368). Once ingested, the spiritual knowledge becomes a part of John's very being. John continues to add to the text because he interprets the spiritual reality he has come to know and because the idea of text becomes so loosely defined. The text becomes a part of John; it becomes a living being that is itself progressing toward a Truth. At the beginning of the poem, the parchment that the poem is supposed to come from is "covered with [a] cloth of hair" (7), and immediately, John's followers begin to try to read his body: "And laid him in the light where we might see; / For certain smiles began about his mouth, / And his lids moved, presageful of the end" (31-33). John is the text, alive and covered with hair. The same haircloth is a part of the stiff garment future generations must wear if they choose to accept only a literal meaning of the Bible without seeking a fresh interpretation. The text/haircloth is a memento mori of past religious leaders, the skin of their ideas without any nourishing qualities. It becomes a hair shirt some religious people dress themselves in, and they suffer ignorance as well as spiritual



stagnancy because they refuse to seek God themselves.

Revising doctrine through its language, John's theology in "A Death in the Desert" differs from a traditional view of the Bible. In fact, he seems to rewrite the Bible's Creation story in his theology about three souls as Browning, through him, writes his own canon. As soon as John awakes, he begins to talk of his soul, his brain, and his self, which Theotypas explains is part of the core of John's doctrine. This bracketed doctrinal explanation highlights the inherent distance between teacher and student (much like John learning from "Christ's mouth" [135]) as well as the scholia added to the teachings. This doctrine is of three souls making up the one soul of each person: "Does," "which works" and grounds humans to the earth (86-88); "Knows," which thinks and wills and pulls humans upward (89-93); and "Is," which "constitut[es] man's self" and pulls humans to God (97-102). These words are strongly reminiscent of the Creation story in Genesis, in which humans are created to be human and to commune with God (Is), but they try to attain divine knowledge by eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Know), and then are cursed by having to work (Does). The Creation story is about the descent from communing with God to becoming lowly creatures of the earth, and John's philosophy is about the ascent back to the communion with God, the true purpose of life. However, there is one major difference—the function of "Know"—between the Creation story and John's philosophy. In the Creation story, their free will allows them to question, and causes Adam and Eve to disobey God, but in John's philosophy, "Know" "duly tends upward in its turn" (93), leading humans to the "Is," the intimate connection to God and themselves as beings. The knowledge in John's

philosophy is spiritual and does not bring humans completely up to God, but allows them to begin to ascertain God's spirit and their own souls. However, to be able to approach the spiritual realm of knowledge, truth-seekers must disentangle themselves from their preconceptions of it. An iconoclastic will that questions everything will ultimately lead humans to God if God is truth.

John's idea of humans' triune souls mimics the function of the parts of the Trinity, as he uses the language of the Bible to rewrite theology. God is traditionally "I am" in the Old Testament (Exod. 3.14), so He would be the "Is." According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the marker that by which individuals know God, such as when the dove descends on Jesus (Mark 1.10), or the intercessor when they cannot commune with God (Rom. 8.26), or the means of expressing spiritual truths to others (Acts 2.4). Hence, the Holy Spirit would be the "Know." Jesus would be the "Does" because in the Bible He physically came to earth to do the will of God. In terms of the hierarchy of "Does," "Know," and "Is," the Trinity would be ordered: Jesus, the Holy Ghost, and God, which, according to Adam Roberts, is heretical because it denotes a hierarchy in the Trinity (God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus) that must not be present from the viewpoint of orthodox Christianity (53).

Another problem with this easy connection between the three souls and the Trinity is a vital question about the nature of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is complex although its origin in the Bible is ambiguous. Genesis does not mention the Holy Spirit or Jesus, but ambiguously refers to the "Spirit of God" (1.2). Perhaps God started out as just God, then God split into the Trinity when man's soul split from Is into Is, Know, and

Does. Or, already in the Trinity, God created man in His image and so created man to sin. According to Roberts, the poem expresses the opposite view of “Caliban,” that man creates God in his image, and instead “takes to a particular extreme the idea of God making man in His image” (52). However, there is another way to think about the correlation between man’s three souls and God’s three entities. Perhaps God split into the Trinity with the Incarnation as God’s way of mimicking man.

This idea of God mimicking man is part of Robert Browning’s philosophy. Browning believed that man had a triple soul consisting of body, mind, and spirit (Crowell, The Triple xii). Browning followed Decartes’s premise “‘cogito ergo sum’ (I think [am thinking], therefore I exist [am existing,]) and so believed that the only thing that is definitive in our life is our own existence (because we can doubt it, we know we exist)” (Karlin and Woolford 194). So, the “Know” part of the soul is made complete and leads to the “Is” when the mind questions its being. This process is completed when John has just awakened to contemplate how future generations will question his existence. Through this idea, he can question (and so prove) his existence, and realize his “Is.” The language of the lines following line 197 reinforces his discovery (“With me who hardly am withheld at all, / But shudderingly, scarce a shred between, / Lie bare to the universal prick of light” [203-05]), with the word is beginning three of the lines (210-12). These lines lead into his discussion of teaching people about Christ and the fundamental inability to prove anything outside of one’s own existence.

According to Browning’s philosophy, after realizing your “Is,” the next step is to wonder how you came to be:

If I exist, as I find I do, then something must have caused me to exist, and the name "God" may be attached to that cause without any further doctrinal entanglements. But if God created me, then he must have created everything else, must therefore, be absolute Power: "thus blend / I, and all things perceived, in one Effect" ('Parleying with Francis Furini' II. 360-61). (Karin and Woolford 223)

God represents Power and Christ represents Love, and, in terms of Browning's poetic philosophy, God represents the subjective poet and Christ, the objective poet (Karin and Woolford 224). Therefore, the most important part of this doctrine is in the Incarnation, in combining Power and Love, which in their absolute forms are mutually exclusive. To Browning, the combination of the two, like the integration of the subjective and the objective, is the most poetic act.

Absolute love and absolute power can be reconciled only through the Incarnation. Both love and power are found in human nature, but, according to Browning's deduction, only power is part of God's nature because love denotes a humbleness and self-sacrifice that is impossible for power to have (Karin and Woolford 223). Browning believed that God had to split into two parts, Christ and God, to be able to express love the way humans do, a doctrine that was "highly unorthodox, if not heterodox, if not frankly heretical" (Karin and Woolford 223). So, according to Browning, God did split into the Trinity (or part of it, at least) to mimic humans. Of his contemporaries, G. K. Chesterton alone commented on Browning's idea of the Trinity, suggesting that the Incarnation might be considered an act of God's jealousy of the human ability to love (Karin and

Woolford 223-24). This doctrine of a competing, God who is jealous of man is also present in "Saul," which David reconciles by prophesying about the coming of Christ.

David considers:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,  
That I doubt his own love can compete with it? Here the parts shift?  
Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what Began? (266-68)

With these doctrines, Browning declares his freedom from the confines of the strict, doctrinal language and focuses instead on the Bible's overarching message. He uses Biblical language to break down the idols of doctrine (the interpretation of that language) and revise the Bible.

Browning's heretical doctrine is shrouded in the terms "Know," "Is," and "Does," and presented as the philosophy of the pious dying disciple, John, who even refers to "The love that tops the might, the Christ in God" (265). John's doctrine forces the reader to reinterpret the religious ideas they might take for granted. Knowledge can be problematic both in the Bible and in John's doctrine because it can lead to understanding or ignorance. Like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Know appears to present an option to understand God, but actually may plummet man further into visceral ignorance: "Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift" (295). The knowing soul is presented with the ability to know its humanity and better know God. Here, the temptation to attempt to gain complete independence from God is the greatest. However, it seems as though there is hope. Man can, without the loss of his soul, progress from self-consciousness to spiritual realization: "Made to know that he can know and not

more; [...] While man knows partly but conceives beside, / Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact" (576-83). However, that spiritual realization cannot be based solely on a text or on someone else's experience with God. As John explains, the Bible is only a tool by which to know God: "He needed satisfaction God could give, / And did give, as ye have the written word" (502-03). However, depending on it exclusively to spell out immortal Truth may lead to spiritual death; thus, the parchment truly parches its reader. Browning no doubt used this word with both meanings in mind. The image of the open cave's mouth filled with sand aptly captures the poem's theme: The text is barren unless the truth-seeking interpreters connect to the aquifer—the internal soul of the piece. However, to get there, the readers must break apart the text—the very ground beneath them. The Bible readers who merely look for the text's surface meaning miss the opportunity to truly connect to the source of life: God. At the end of the poem, John dies, and is buried. The cave's mouth, which laid open to ingest John's message, is, after his death and the lapse of time, "filled with sand" (647), the message "scattered mouth to mouth" (660). As the message is disseminated, it deconstructs into a million grains of sand that, instead of providing the life-giving nutrients it is meant to, and dries up the spiritual life of the receiver. Only through breaking idols down can anyone truly experience God anew. If one is willing to read the text wrong, to explore new readings while searching for Truth, the Truth will emerge on its own.

Through "A Death in the Desert," Browning questions the validity of the Bible as the sole connection from man to God while he rewrites the Creation story and Christian theology in his own terms. Browning, a Christian man, believed his own theology to be

valid, instead of depending exclusively on Church doctrine because it allowed him to understand God in a way he would not if he merely inherited other people's interpretations. In his time of revolution, Browning began knocking down the idols of Christianity, which had autocratic interpretations and dependence on literalism. Some critics have argued that the ending of the poem is a "triumphant assertion of the crushing of heresy" (Roberts 55); however, heresy is simply recast by an individualistic view of Truth. According to John, human-understood truth should be considered spiritual untruth: "What he considers that he knows today, / Come but tomorrow, he will find misknown" (597-98). The Bible, a "copy" (627) of Moses's understanding of God's law, has been "replaced as time requires" (628), and is finally solidified into a "type" (629). Christians are to continue this process of the rejuvenating the text so that it will be a better type of the Truth's antitype:

By these, make newest vessels, reach the type!

If ye demur, this judgment on your head,

Never to reach the ultimate, angels' law,

Indulging every instinct of the soul

There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing! (629-33)

Interpretation and revision are linked, and the reader is indicted to join the process.

Similarly, Theotypas, the author of the section of the poem that elucidates John's doctrine of the triple soul of man, is the everyman whose interpretation of doctrine is absorbed into the text itself. Browning uses the word gloss in this poem, as it is used in Paracelsus, to bring attention to the necessity of interpretation. Theotypas is an enigma

who must be dug out of the text; likewise, he refers to his name as the “glossa” he gives himself (104). Theotypas’s name, his “glossa,” is another means by which to interpret the poem. If the Bible is “God’s type,” it is in constant danger of losing connection with the antitype it is meant to model. If authors like Theotypas can jump in and out of the text, “type God” and summarize extra-textual doctrines at will, then God’s type melts into man’s. However, if the Bible was “arranged by God according to the principles of progressive revelation” (Landow N. pag.), such as in typology, that type can be ever changing. Interpretation is unavoidable, so perhaps God’s type works within and despite man’s, rather than through it.

John warns against “the glozing of some new shrewd tongue” (328), which stresses interpretation’s necessity and danger. Man’s purpose within such a system is to accept the form of Truth that God offers and allow God to mold it into Truth in his hands. That form of Truth can be the Bible and the self. God is traditionally considered the potter: “But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (Isa. 64.8). John calls Christians to accept their “creatureship” (624), and “applaud the flesh indeed / In what is still flesh-imitating clay” (620-21). Any sort of real understanding of God means relinquishing everything to allow Him to teach Himself to the individual. Biblical teachings are not stagnant words, but ideas that undergo metamorphosis with each reading, by individuals, to reach themselves personally.

John is an appropriate messenger for Browning’s controversial views, and through John, the words of Revelation echo. John’s revising biblical doctrine lends



righteous credibility to Browning's beliefs and complicates the inherited relationship between John as poet and Browning as poet: "The nineteenth-century poet and the first-century Apostle, without matching writing styles or voice prints, are in a creative contest to spell the Word" (Dupras, "The Word's" 105). Browning gains interpretive space through biblical revision and sets himself up as a new religious thinker and model for a new age, breaking religious icons of doctrine and text and redefining the method of spiritual connections. Again, the words of Revelation echo in the background:

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. (Revelation 2.26-28; emphasis mine).

Browning, accepting the role of poet, i.e. philosophical leader, has to break the accepted conventions to create a new way of approaching God. However, if such an approach fails, Browning could end up misleading, sacrificing his poetic and moral aspirations.<sup>6</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Lucifer also holds the title of the "morning star."<sup>7</sup> The leadership Browning offers is not prescriptive, but individualistic; people must become iconoclastic leaders in order to own their lives. He offers a model for iconoclasm; through art, he "tell[s] a truth / Obliquely" to "breed the thought" in his readers (The Ring and the Book 12.855-56). A popular figure in the Bible, John is an eclectic author who dared to break from the rest of the Bible in content, through his Gospel, and in form, in Revelation. In the end, a leader must be accepted to lead, so in "A Death in the

Desert" Browning uses John as his spokesman. However, iconoclasm necessitates the continuation of misreading. If iconoclasm is not repeated, it becomes stagnant and autocratic. Reading the verses of St. John backwards might be the only way to approach them anew. Reading diabolically might be the best answer to restore the balance and integrity of truth to the message.

## Chapter Four

## Idols of the Tribe:

## Perceptual Iconoclasm in “Caliban upon Setebos; or Natural Theology in the Island”

*Who, making Himself feared through what He does,  
 Looks up, first, and perceives he cannot soar  
 To what is quiet and hath happy life;  
 Next looks down here, and out of very spite  
 Makes this a bauble-world to ape yon real,  
 These good things to match those as hips do grapes.*

*(“Caliban upon Setebos” 143-48)*

The deceitfulness of language does not stop with language itself. The same problem of representation also destroys the dependability of perception. Perception is suspect as a sort of idol—a fluid idol that changes shape according to the nature and experiences of the individual. Bacon claims that “human understanding is like a false mirror” (Coquillotte 229); perception is a false representation of reality that often keeps the individual from actually seeking a world beyond it. Browning focuses on the problems of perception in “Caliban upon Setebos; or Natural Theology in the Island,” in which Caliban, the creature from Shakespeare’s The Tempest, announces his theology based on his perception of the world. He claims that Setebos, out of spite, alters earthly perception: “Makes this a bauble-world to ape yon real, / These good things to match those as hips do grapes” (147-48). Although Caliban can understand that there is a spiritual truth above the material, he cannot perceive it as separated from his material

existence. By revealing the limitations of perception, Browning shatters the perception of his readers and makes any theology suspect. However, by realizing the deficiencies of man's knowledge, readers come closer to understanding their relationship to God: "The total inefficacy of words to describe God has convinced Browning that all words are inadequate symbols. [. . .] Man's faith must be built upon what he can know through experience" (Lawson 158). By realizing the limitations of theology, readers have a better understanding of the spiritual realm in how it differs from the material, rather than how it is similar.

"Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island" uses a spider's web as an image of Caliban's perception. The web illustrates and brackets Caliban's view of Setebos and the Quiet, the gods in his world. Talking about himself by means of a third-person pronoun before mentioning Setebos, Caliban meditates: "He looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross / And recross till they weave a spider-web / (Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times)" (12-14). The web is made of light, which breaks through clouds, and it is like a net that attracts a big fish, although the fish breaks through it. These lines, strikingly beautiful and unexpected coming from Caliban, foreshadow an event we as readers do not see happen. Caliban's broken theology could be described as occasional beams of light breaking through clouds that create a broken view of the Quiet, or the god above Setebos. The poem, like what Caliban sees, becomes web-like and the reader is left the interpretive job of discriminating between clouds and beams of light. The fish could be the traditional Christian symbol breaking through. However, as Christian doctrine is not substantiated in the poem (it never breaks through), the web is

more likely something that keeps Caliban from seeing God—his own perception.

Caliban's theology is similar to Arachne's web—a negative portrayal of God based on human understanding of it.

Caliban's theology and the nature of its representation are quite enigmatic. John Woolford questions the intended meaning of Caliban's theology:

Caliban imagines a cruel, vengeful deity who mirrors the same qualities in himself. But what was RB's [sic] purpose in constructing such a creature? Is he satirizing primitive consciousness [...]? [...] Or is the poem not a satire at all, but a celebration of Caliban's nature [...]? ("Self-Consciousness" 86)

There is no definitive way in such a masterfully written poem to get at the primary point of it all, but then, that probably is the point. Even in a theological text (Caliban's theology written as text), there is so much interpretive room between the language, the subject, the writer, the speaker—even the punctuation—that a clear, definitive answer to the questions of the spiritual realm is almost impossible. However, Crowell holds that Browning believed living in ignorance of even our true natures is what makes us human:

Man is forbidden in this life to understand absolute truth, which lies beyond this world. The ultimate secrets of creation and God's inscrutable plan must not be seen by man directly, nor must he seek to tear the veil hiding the Absolute. To do so is to be guilty of hubris, the desire to become like God in knowledge and power. (The Triple xiv)

By admitting the impossibility of an earthly understanding of the spiritual, and

relinquishing their own perspectives to fallibility, readers approach the truth of human existence.

The layered structure of the poem adds to Caliban's ever-building and ever-deconstructing perspective. Browning made many changes to the poem over time, such as adding apostrophes to denote an absent pronoun, adding capital letters to mark references to Setebos and the Quiet, adding apostrophes before a verb to show that Caliban is referring to himself, and adding brackets around the opening and closing paragraphs of the poem (Woolford, "Self-Consciousness" 96-97). The purpose Woolford sees in all of this editing is a mirroring of the compositional approach and the thematic material, an identification and withdrawal within the compositional space, and a layering of textuality over oral expression, especially in the sense of a deconstruction of the monologue as a spoken utterance ("Self-Consciousness" 98). Browning's use of punctuation and speech pattern distances the reader from Caliban; however, his rationality draws the reader into the underlying argument.

Caliban both draws (like an artist) and revolts (like an iconoclast) readers, whom Browning thus challenges to choose their distance from Caliban—either accepting or rejecting him as a reflection of their own theology (namely of what their theology would be if they did not have traditional Christianity to accept or reject). The idea of text (or lack of it) is fundamental to this poem. Caliban has no set way of perceiving Setebos, so he has to trust his own bestial instincts. Dupras explains the fluid textuality of the poem:

Through Caliban's enisled anxieties and analogical sensibilities Browning draws attention to an unfinished intertextual contest between creativity

and interpretation. The process of reading the poem, like the process of writing it, involves boldly resisting dominance and anxiously daring authority to assert itself in order to compose a text that is never fully composed. ("Tempest" 75)

Caliban forces judgmental readers first to determine how their perception of spirituality differs from his. The logical answer might be that Caliban has no Bible or prescribed text to follow. However, even a more respectable character such as Browning's David uses Caliban's logic when prophesying, i.e., leaving the textual realm:

Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,  
 And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can?  
 [.....]  
 Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!  
 ("Saul" 269-70, 300)

David prophesies about the coming of Christ because he realizes the strength of his love for Saul, even being willing to "suffer for him." However, he is "impotent" in his humanity. He imagines that God would share his love and willingness to suffer, but would actually be able to act on it because God has the power to. One can almost hear Caliban ("I . . . so he") in the background of David's language: "I [would] suffer for him [. . .]. So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!" Even in the most spiritual of moments when Christ is prophesied for the first time, human perception defines the understanding of it, as it presumably must.

This attempt to textualize speech also mimics the nature of the oral-turned-written

tradition of the Bible. The punctuation and divisions in any modern Bible are not original, but have been put there to make it easier to understand. However, this editing changes the voice, the organization, perhaps even the meaning of the original text. The Bible is that which is missing from Caliban's understanding of God, and this difference dramatically alters his theology. Caliban's God is similar in many ways to the way God in the Old Testament would be perceived without the Ten Commandments or the law books such as Leviticus or Numbers—cold, powerful, and without an understandable order to His actions. Text thus shapes our understanding of God—it provides the perimeter of our expectations of His personality. Even in the New Testament, God is not defined in absolutes, but explained in stories and in allusions to Old Testament texts that continually modify images of God. These icons of understanding—myth and images—are fundamental to a human mental representation of God. However, at the same time, they block individuality in understanding God. The web at the beginning of the poem both helps Caliban understand God and keeps him from God. The web that starts to open at the beginning of the poem closes at the end: "What, what? A curtain o'er the world at once!" (284). A human understanding of God is such that truth is not found in the confirmation of our theology, but in our realization of the inability of a complete human understanding of God: "Man will never solve all of the riddles of existence. But herein is precisely the test. The endless search for truth, not absolute truth itself, is man's proper goal" (Crowell, *The Triple* xiv). Neither way—Caliban's theology or Christianity—is absolutely discernable in the message and construct of "Caliban upon Setebos," and so readers must forage to interpret Caliban's theology and at the same time, their own.



Browning reveals the inadequacy of Caliban's perception, and at the same time, breaks the idol of the readers' perception. Although the readers might align themselves more with the character of Prospero than Caliban in The Tempest, they cannot escape Caliban's theological pitfalls. Browning breaks down the layers of bloated perception and self-perception to present the Truth—de te, fabula, we are all Caliban. By abstaining from defining that truth in the poem, Browning pushes his readers to continue the perceptual iconoclasm. Readers can approach spiritual truth by accepting the limitations of man's perceptual truth.

### Conclusion

True to Browning's belief in the duality of truth, the Truth remains at the edges of Browning's text, just out of grasp. Not easily interpreted, his text must be broken to be explicated. Browning abstains from guiding the reader. Instead, he forces his readers to tease the poems' "pricks and cracks" ("An Epistle . . . of Karshish, the Arab Physician" 9) to find their messages. Just as Browning believed that there is a God and a Truth that can only begin to be seen by those who are broken and searching, his readers must accept the censure of his iconoclasm to realize the messages of his poetry. They must become iconoclastic on their own to allow the messages to change them instead of merely encapsulating the poems in easy interpretations.

The form in which Browning primarily writes, the dramatic monologue, furthers his philosophical and aesthetic goals. The layering of dramatic monologues forces readers not only to determine the speaker's perspective but also to reconsider their own. The only clues to Browning's creative perspective, which is hidden like his speakers', are the pieces of evidence that might surface from within the text. Because the readers are not constrained to interpret Browning's characters by other characters in the poems, the opportunities for interpretation are broadened, which allows the monologues to express "indeterminacy of interpretation" (Woolford, Browning 71). The language fragments between the author, the speaker, the audience, and the reader to the point that interpretation is difficult. Thus, any interpretation, however textual, inevitably has to point back to the interpreter's perspective and the ability to put the pieces together in a believable way. With any attempt at interpretation, the work buckles in its own

indeterminacy; with the slightest breath, the sand fragments drift away. The interpreters become iconoclasts, breaking down the structure to find the truth of it. However, in that construction, there is truth. In the indeterminacy, there is meaning.

Creatively iconoclastic, Browning combines his humanistic and revolutionary impulses to better the world by artistically destroying religious and philosophical stagnancy, what Wordsworth describes as “savage torpor” (“Preface to Lyrical Ballads” 129). Through revision and iconoclasm, Browning is able to re-create his world. Within such creation (rather than despite it) lies the truth. Browning’s Truth is immutable and persistent, despite man’s representation of it: “Browning’s John is [not] the Apostle [. . .] but rather the John that Christians required and created to satisfy spiritual need, as John had intimated they would, and as such represents a triumph of Christianity over historical fact” (Faurot 2). The Bible is a tool to reach the Truth, but by itself it is merely man’s truth, the infinite inadequately poured into the finite. Likewise, philosophy of any kind is unsuitable to replace the individual’s reaction to the world. Through the breakdown of language and perception, an authentic self emerges from the iconoclast.

Browning breaks the idols of philosophy, culture, language, and perspective, and beckons a New Age in which the individual and Truth can endure unencumbered:

Anon at the dawn, all that trouble had withered from earth—  
 Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day’s tender birth;  
 In the gathered intensity brought to the grey of the hills;  
 In the shuddered forests’ held breath; in the sudden wind-thrills;  
 [.....]

And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and low,

With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—"E'en so, it is so!"

("Saul," 324-27, 334-35)

All of creation witnesses a change like David's prophecy of the Incarnation. The earth itself whispers its witness and, acting out the Incarnation, gives birth to the new day, the new theology. Iconoclasm gives birth to a fresh ideology and a new chance to be reconciled with God. By recognizing and destroying the idols of philosophy, culture, language, and perception, Browning claims a firsthand relationship to the world, and offers the same to his readers. He incites the individual to a personal revolution in which iconoclasm is the necessary means by which to gain freedom.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Barrett Browning references Bacon at least six times in her recorded correspondence, often directly quoting him. She mentions Bacon in a letter to Thomas Campbell dated May 1823, along with Plato, Socrates, and Cicero, implying in her letter that these would be the great philosophical minds with which someone of a philosophical turn would need to be familiar (Kelley and Hudson 1: 181). She fervently takes up for Bacon in a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd, dated June 21, 1828, and quotes Bacon later to Boyd (May 4, 1829) (Kelley and Hudson 2: 187).

<sup>2</sup>All biblical quotations in this paper will be from the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup>According to James Loucks, Browning's use of the spider's web image in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" probably comes from Francis Bacon's Advancement of Learning (Loucks 157). Bacon's use of the spider's web imagery refers not only to empty scholarship but also specifically to unenlightened, self-centered scholarship. In Book 1 of Advancement of Learning, Bacon writes: "For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of not substance or profit" (12).

<sup>4</sup>In "The Poet," Emerson, also greatly influenced by Unitarianism, refers to a central truth that could be poetically reached and interpreted, but is markedly different from Browning's ideal of a dual truth: "For poetry was all written before time was, and

whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the song of nations” (199). Emerson’s literary career began at the same time as Browning’s. Apparently, Emerson did not think that Browning was one of the “men of more delicate ear,” as he wrote in a letter to Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, “in him [Tennyson] as in the authors of Paracelsus and Festus [including Browning], I hear through all the varied music the native tones of an ordinary, to make my meaning plainer, say, of a vulgar man. They are men of talents who sing, but they are not the children of music” (Greer 220).

<sup>5</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche later claims “truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions” (250).

<sup>6</sup>He could become a false leader like Paracelsus, whose “by-paths, once proved wrong / And beacons properly, would commend again / The good old ways” (4.108-10), such as reading “discovered divers verses of St. John” forward to “refresh” the soul, and “muttered backwards” to cure “the gout, the stone, / The colic and what not” (4.112-15).

<sup>7</sup>The morning-star image appears many times in Browning’s poetry, denoting iconoclastic leadership. Fra Lippo Lippi uses it to predict that one of his student painters will become a true artist: “why, I see as certainly / As that the morning-star’s about to shine, / What will hap some day. We’ve a youngster here” (271-73). This reference

comes immediately after Fra Lippo Lippi refers to the inherent falseness of religious boundaries. Lippi seems to anticipate that his student, Guidi, will follow in his footsteps, questioning the nature of religion and the Church through his art. Lippi mentions that Guidi already manages to watch Lippi very carefully (274-75) and ignores the monks (276).] Blougram uses this same image as a sign of leadership, like Napoleon's, which should be questioned: "Where do you find his star?—his crazy trust / God knows through what or in what?" (445-46). The Pope also uses the morning star image in his monologue in The Ring and the Book to refer to himself as a God-appointed leader: "I styled celestial and the morning-star? / I, who in this world act resolvedly, / Dispose of men, their bodies and their souls" (10.1290-92). He uses this imagery to respond to his own fears of inadequacy when it comes to his role as the leader who must break down the world around him so it can be rebuilt. The Pope later explains the necessity of rupturing the existing systems of religion and understanding for growth to occur: "As we broke up that old faith of the world, / Have we, next age, to break up this new— / Faith, in the thing, grown faith in the report" (10.1858-59). Similar to the way "the proofs shift" (295) in "Death in the Desert," the Pope describes truth as a function of this fluctuating world that can move with it to allow new connections to be made to reality. The Pope sees this kind of truth-hunting as a necessary part of moral growth:

This life is training and a passage; pass,—  
 Still, we march over some flat obstacle  
 We made give way before us; solid truth

In front of it, what motion for the world? (1406-09)

Knocking down “flat obstacle[s]” is vital to get to the “solid truth/ In front of it”;  
iconoclasm is necessary to finding truth.



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