

Supernatural Language in Robert Browning's Works

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Ph.D.

2000

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Throughout his life Robert Browning was fascinated by the idea of language with supernatural power. Powerful, magical language appears in many of his poems and plays, as a model for perfect poetic language. This fascination manifests itself in his life-long interest in magicians and the language of magic, and in Hebrew, traditionally considered the original language, endowed with God's power.

Supernatural language is characterised by an inherent connection between signified and signifier that is part of a divine scheme. It does not merely denote: it has an unexplainable and miraculous effect over people and objects in the world. I will explore three kinds of supernatural language in Browning's works: magic language, Hebrew as the original language, and the Word of God. Browning finds such language alluring, in spite of his rational objections to the ideas behind it.

In the background there is the developing science of language and theories of supernatural language are being superseded by scientific descriptions of language as an arbitrary system of signs. The eighteenth and nineteenth century debate on the nature and the origin of language is reflected in Browning's works, and Browning's knowledge of this debate and his views on this issue are discussed in the introduction to my thesis. The first and second chapters are concerned with Browning's interest in magic language, and how it is related to his ideas on poetic language. The third and fourth chapters examine Browning's references to Hebrew and to the idea of the ineffable name. The sixth chapter explores the issue of the rift between the Word of God and the human word, and the seventh chapter delineates Browning's construction of the language of the Other: the primitive, the Arab, and the Jew.

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Introduction

Browning's conception of language is important to the study of his works as a whole. This has been clear to generations of Browning critics, who have studied his many references to the inadequacy and inherent weaknesses of language. Many critics have elaborated on Browning's belief that language is unable to convey truth, and have illustrated this claim with quotations from his poems and plays¹. Some have shown that this emphasis is embodied in Browning's favourite form, the dramatic monologue². Another aspect of Browning's ideas of language has been almost completely ignored: language with supernatural powers or of supernatural origin, omnipotent language, is also mentioned in many of his poems and plays, and constitutes a recurring theme in his work. This omnipotent language is not only referred to but craved, and sometimes used in the poems themselves as part of a poetic technique which attempts to grant the poem itself the efficacy of a supernatural utterance. Supernatural language conveys and contains truths, and is far from inadequate and arbitrary. Thus, Browning's ideas on language are complex, and cover the full spectrum of ideas on language in the nineteenth century. Even though Browning was not a systematic thinker on the subject, his poems and plays reflect his interest in the debate on language that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though its origins lie in ancient Greece. I have been exploring Browning's many references to supernatural language in poems and plays spanning

¹Norton B. Crowell, *The Convex Glass: The Mind of Robert Browning* (New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press, 1968), p.202. Clyde de L. Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, U.S.A.: Blackwell, 1993), p.169.

² For example, David W. Shaw, *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p.315.

his career, and relating these references to philosophical and religious debates on the nature of language.

In his father's library, which consisted of approximately six thousand books, Browning was acquainted with classical works, books of reference, and esoteric texts, among other fields of study³. He systematically studied languages, but was also acquainted with more esoteric forms of speech through his reading of magic texts and Jewish texts. The debate over the Word and its status was close to his heart for religious reasons, and thus the subject of supernatural language became an important one in his writing. As far as eighteenth and nineteenth century theories on language are concerned, he probably picked them up from his year at the University of London as well as from his own general reading.

Definition of Supernatural Language

Supernatural language is usually of divine or superhuman origin, and it has an unexplainable and miraculous effect on objects and persons in the world.

Supernatural language is language that can 'do' things rather than just denote: it can wield unmediated power over people and objects in the world. There are several kinds of supernatural language referred to in this dissertation, yet they all have some inherent common characteristics. Some of these shared traits derive from a common cultural background or cultural influence for example, the ideas of supernatural language in the Kabbala infiltrated Renaissance magic and the character of magic

³ John Maynard, *Browning's Youth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p.296-297.

language. Beyond common heritage and influence, I believe, as do many sociologists and linguists, that there is some universal human craving for supernatural language which manifests itself in the tendency to produce a linguistic context that attributes such supernatural power to language. This human tendency manifests itself in Christian ideas on language as well as African magic, and some of the psychological and sociological explanations behind it will also be presented here.

I will begin by doing my best to define what I term supernatural language. The different supernatural languages presented in the six chapters of my thesis are magic language in the Western tradition, Hebrew as a supernatural language, and the Word in the Christian tradition. All these have much in common outside of Browning's work as well as within it. Within Browning's poems and plays all these instances of supernatural language are contrasted with and constitute a model for poetic language. For Browning, the issue of supernatural language is intermingled with his interest in the status and character of poetic language. He is attracted to supernatural language and he explores it in three different aspects that concern him as a writer: its authority, its truth-value, and its power over an audience. Beyond Browning's interests, these ideas on language do have some things in common. Magic language, the Word, and Hebrew as a supernatural language have some basic elements in common. The first assumption they all share is the idea that the meaning is entrenched in the sign which denotes it, namely, that there is an unshakable tie between signified and signifier. The debate over the nature of the connection between signified and signifier is a traditional philosophical debate dating from Greek philosophy, which in the nineteenth century became a linguistic focus of attention as well. Saussure's claim that the tie between signified and signifier is

arbitrary is not an original claim though certainly not a trivial one. In Plato's "Cratylus", the most influential and famous classical text dealing with this debate, Cratylus claims that there is a natural affinity between the word and the object it denotes. This is the crux of Cratylus's argument as he summarises it in the dialogue:

The use of names, Socrates, as I should imagine, is to inform: the simple truth is, that he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them⁴.

Socrates does not make an unequivocal claim in the dialogue. He ends by saying "This may be true, Cratylus, but is also very likely to be untrue"⁵. The essence of Socrates's view is as follows:

I quite agree with you that words should as far as possible resemble things; but I fear that this dragging in of resemblance, as Hermogenes says, is a shabby thing, which has to be supplemented by the mechanical aid of convention with a view to correctness; for I believe that if we could always, or almost always, use likenesses, which are perfectly appropriate, this would be the most perfect state of language; as the opposite is the most imperfect⁶.

This "most perfect state of language", in which signified and signifier bear a likeness, is a thing desired by many philosophers and authors in the Western tradition, and is

⁴ *Great Books of the Western World: Plato*, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), vol. 7, p.111.

⁵ *Plato*, p. 114.

⁶ *Plato*, p. 111.

also the subject of this thesis. Browning, who knew his Plato well, seems to share Socrates's sentiments, rejecting the likeness between signified and signifier and embracing the conventional view of language, while still yearning for that "perfect state of language". On February 21, 1846, Browning refers to the same idea of likeness in a love letter to Elizabeth Barrett:

Now to these letters! I do solemnly, unaffectedly wonder how you can put so much pure felicity into an envelope so as that I shall get it as from the fount head. This to-day, those yesterday - there is, I see, and know, thus much goodness in line after line, goodness to be scientifically appreciated, *proved there* - but over and above, is it in the writing, the dots and traces, the seal, the paper; - where does the subtle charm lie beyond all rational accounting for? The other day I stumbled on a quotation from J. Baptista Porta - wherein he avers that any musical instrument made out of wood possessed of medicinal properties retains, being put to use, such virtues undiminished, and that, for instance, a sick man to whom you should pipe on a pipe of elder-tree would so receive all the advantage derivable from a decoction of its berries - From whence, by a parity of reasoning, I may discover, I think, that the very ink and paper were... ah, what were they? The curious thinking won't do for me and the wise head which is mine, so I will lie and rest in my ignorance of content and understand that without any magic at all you simply wish to make one person, which of your free goodness proves to be your RB, - to make me

supremely happy, and that you have your wish - you *do* bless me!⁷

Daniel Karlin read this passage in terms that are very relevant to this discussion:

Browning is quoting from Giovanni Battista della Porta's *Magiae Naturalis*, a sixteenth-century treatise which he most probably found in his father's library, and the allusion links this whole topic to Browning's lifelong fascination with the occult as an image of art. The alchemist, the magician, the spiritualist - these are devious figures, like the kind of poet Browning felt himself to be, for whom the ritual conjuring of language was a substitute for vision. How appropriate, then, that the analogy should break down; that Browning should fail to convey what he intends, and should rebuke himself for his attempt to do so. Moreover, this attempt was concerned precisely with analysing the nature of the divinity he adores - a divinity who defies such 'rational accounting', whose ways remain unsearchable, and whose 'free goodness' confers its blessing: in short, Elizabeth Barrett emerges from this stream of words surprisingly transformed into a Protestant-flavoured Almighty God. In *Paracelsus* - a poem whose hero is one of della Porta's confraternity - the poet Aprile exclaims, 'God is the perfect poet, / Who in his person acts his own creations.' 'You simply wish', says Browning to Elizabeth Barrett, 'and[...]you have your wish - you *do* bless me!' In comparison, the 'pipe of

⁷ Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis, *The Brownings' Correspondence* (Winfield, Kansas, and London: Wedgstone Press and Athlone, 1994), XII, p. 48.

elder-tree' - the tree of the Old Law, perhaps - is an outworn channel of healing⁸.

Karlin draws the reader's attention to the hierarchy of magic and religion and their vehicles: Browning is ambivalent towards magic, yet attracted to it, whereas the Word of God is unequivocally presented as perfect poetry. What is interesting here is that Browning associates these two conceptions of language with each other, seeing that both confer an inherent power to the spoken word or to the written one.

The idea that the physical text might contain the characteristics and power of its content is conjured up again in "A Death in the Desert" and in "Fust and his Friends", where it is also debunked. Obviously, Browning did not use the terms signified and signifier, but rather termed the debate one of the relation between "word and thing". The ultimate and almost impossible aim of Browning as a poet is to destroy the barrier between word and thing, an achievement that he attributes to Christopher Smart in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart":

Smart, solely of such songmen, pierced the screen
 'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul, -
 Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
 Live from the censer – shapely or uncouth,
 Fire-suffused through and through, one blaze of truth

⁸ Daniel Karlin, *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.205-206.

Undeafened by a lie,

(113-118)

Browning was acquainted with Smart's poetry from as early as 1824⁹, and he was obviously influenced by Smart's radical ideas on language which are reflected in many of his poems, and even in the notes of his translation of Horace.¹⁰ Harriet Guest, who studied Smart's ideas on language, concludes:

Smart's use of language is dominated by his belief in its divine origin, for this belief recognizes a divine revelation in language, which becomes not only a means of communicating our ideas through a pre-given, arbitrary, and contractually agreed set of signs, but a system which, in reflecting the divine creative language which was instantaneously manifested in the created world, reflects the order and significance of nature. Language becomes nature translated and interpreted, and as the system of nature can be understood as a mediated revelation of the immanence of the deity, so language too can be understood as a potential source of revelation¹¹

Browning encountered similar ideas in Jewish mysticism, in which he was interested, and in Jacob Boehme's writings, to which he refers in "Transcendentalism". Boehme writes:

⁹ William Clyde DeVane, *Browning's Parleyings: The Autobiography of A Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Oxford University Press, 1927), p.93.

¹⁰ Harriet Guest elaborates on this subject and refers the reader to numerous examples in *A Form of Sound Words: The Religious Poetry of Christopher Smart* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.167, and especially in chapter 3.

¹¹ Guest, *A Form of Sound Words*, p.169.

Further, we find here the tree of tongues or languages, with four alphabets.

One signed with the characters of the Mystery, in which is found the language of Nature, which in all languages is the root. But in the birth of plurality (or of many languages) it is not known save by its own children, to whom the mystery itself gives understanding; for it is a wonder of God¹².

The “four alphabets” are those of nature, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and the fifth essential component is the revelation of God’s spirit to the person who is trying to decipher God’s alphabet. Indeed, both Browning’s reference to Smart’s achievement in the *Parleyings* and to Boehme’s revelation in “Transcendentalism”, emphasise that this linguistic breakthrough is a rarity, which excludes virtually all of humanity, and “The Parleying with Christopher Smart” also associates this revelation with madness. Unlike Smart, Browning also insists on the frailty and inadequacy of language, with its revelatory potential a much rarer phenomenon than Smart would claim. Thus, Browning’s writing reflects this debate over the nature of the tie between “word” and “thing”: it contains both comments on the inherent spuriousness of language, and a fantasy of some rare revelation that would prove the opposite.

Some twentieth century theories have been extremely helpful in my attempt to understand the history of this debate. Michel Foucault and Northrop Frye, for example, place the idea of a natural tie between signified and signifier in the Western

¹² Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points, and Other Writings* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), p.154.

tradition in a specific period in the past. Language until the seventeenth century, claims Foucault, was regarded as part of a network of marks stamped by God, waiting to be deciphered. Words are like the marks imprinted in nature, adjusted by God to things themselves and possessing a timeless affinity in relation to them.

The names of things were lodged in the things they designated, just as strength is written in the body of the lion, regality in the eye of the eagle, just as the influence of the planets is marked upon the brows of men: by the form of similitude.¹³

According to Foucault, this perception of bonds of resemblance between the sign and the object it denotes ceases to exist as the Neo-Classical age commences. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries language becomes the only possible medium by which the world can be known, “it was the immediate and spontaneous unfolding of representations...language was a form of knowing and knowing was automatically discourse”¹⁴. In the nineteenth century language loses its privileged position; it no longer bears the magical stamp of what it denotes, nor is it the indispensable tool for acquiring knowledge; language is demoted to the “mere status of an object”: an arbitrary system of signs¹⁵. Language becomes “one object of knowledge among others”, and this, according to Foucault, causes its downfall.

In *The Great Code* Northrop Frye expands upon Vico’s theory of the three phases of culture and language, written in 1729. Browning was probably acquainted with

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p.36.

¹⁴ Foucault, p.296.

¹⁵ Foucault, p.296.

Vico's ideas, and even if he had not read the original texts, he most certainly read the comparatively lengthy entry on Vico in the *Biographie Universelle*. According to Vico, there are three phases in the cycle of history, each having a different idea of language. The conception of language that typifies the first stage is, according to Frye, found in Greek literature before Plato, and in most of the Old Testament.

In this period there is relatively little emphasis on a clear separation of subject and object: the emphasis falls rather on the feeling that subject and object are linked by a common power or energy...The articulating of words may bring this common power into being; hence a magic develops in which verbal elements, 'spell', and 'charm', and the like, play a central role. A corollary of this principle is that there may be a potential magic in any use of words.

Words in such a context are words of power or dynamic forces¹⁶.

This primary stage, claims Frye, is characterised by a metaphorical conception of language in which there is a sense of identity of power between man and nature. In the second stage, however, the relationship is metonymic: "words become primarily the outward expression of inner thoughts and ideas"¹⁷. The third phase of language commences with the Renaissance and reaches its peak during the eighteenth century. In this phase, subject is clearly separated from object; the subject is exposed in sense experience to an objective world, thus enabling scientific investigation.

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1982), p. 6.

¹⁷ Frye, p.7.

These theories of the development of language are reflected in Browning's works, since Browning associates supernatural language with the past rather than with the present. Most of the poems that contain instances of successful supernatural language are anchored in the past, ~~Hans~~ Hans of Halberstadt's spell in "Transcendentalism", and Pietro of Abano's enchantments take place in the middle ages. Other successful supernatural utterances belong to the biblical era: Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus in "Karshish", and the boy's resuscitation of John in "A Death in the Desert". Contemporary attempts at supernatural utterances are pathetic failures, as in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", and poetry, such as Smart's or Browning's own, seems to be the only realm where such powerful utterances still appear. Browning's attraction to supernatural language, shared by Tennyson¹⁸, is a reaction against the demotion of language by linguists and philosophers.

Another characteristic shared by the different types of supernatural language is that they are always a part of a supernatural scheme. The idea behind magic language is that different spirits and demons control the world, and magic language gives one some power or influence over them. The power of the Word or of Hebrew as the original language is based on the idea of divine providence. The power of supernatural language always derives from its essential role in the general scheme of things, whether is a Christian, a magical, or a Kabbalistic idea of providence.

Thus, supernatural language always functions within a context that delineates the metaphysical assumptions of existence.

¹⁸ See chapter 3, "Browning and Magic".

Donald S. Hair dedicated a chapter of his *Robert Browning's Language* to what he terms “the idealist goal of language”, a notion which roughly coincides with the idea of supernatural language. Hair writes:

Browning's exploration of the idealist goal in language nearly always involves three matters which he sees as related: the cataloguing of the world by naming it (an interest which comes out of the encyclopedic ambitions he had from his beginnings as a poet), the identifying of the whole of creation with the Word who is Christ, and the manifesting of that ultimate unity of all things in music.¹⁹

Hair concludes:

In Boehme, then, and perhaps in Swedenborg, Browning encountered a myth of language which made rhyming and the breathing which creates it both a metaphor for the action of a quickening spirit – a conventional troping of breath – and the means whereby separate sounds are brought together in a single pattern, which restores the primal unity of letter and spirit, of sign and signified.²⁰

Hair traces the “idealist goal of language” back to Smart, Boehme, and Swedenborg, overlooking the influence of Jewish sources, such as the Kabbala, and theories of magic language.

¹⁹ Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.149.

²⁰ Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p.168.

The Word

The Christian Word is a supernatural and natural reality: it creates and it is creation itself. The doctrine of the Logos, a combination of Platonic, Aristotelian, and stoic ideas, is that the Logos is “the rational principle that pervaded and gave order to nature”²¹. With the spread of Christianity, Logos became identified with the biblical “Word of God”, and later, at around 150 CE, with Jesus. The Christian idea of the Logos emphasised its “quality as language, word, and message, rather than as mere thought”²².

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth²³.

This idea was developed by the early Christian fathers, some of whom developed a natural theory of language. Browning might have been acquainted with Philo Judaeus's ideas, Origen's, and Isidore of Seville's, all of whom had theories of supernatural language in which the tie between 'word' and 'thing' is based on the

²¹ *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade (New York and London: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 8, p. 440.

²² As above, p.440.

²³ *John* 1.1, *John* 1.14.

power of the Word²⁴. St. Augustine, however, perceived language as a basically conventional and arbitrary system, disconnected from the original Adamic language and from the Word. Augustine deals with this issue in the *Confessions*:

These words, which you had caused to sound in time, were reported by the bodily ear of the hearer to the mind, which has intelligence and inward hearing responsive to your eternal Word. The mind compared these words, which it heard sounding in time, with your Word, which is silent and eternal, and said, ‘God’s eternal Word is far, far different from these words which sound in time. They are far beneath me; in fact, they are not at all, because they die away and are lost. But the Word of my God is above me and endures for ever.’²⁵

Augustine’s approach resembles Browning’s, because it assumes a veritable distance between the perfect language as it once was and as the poet wishes it to be, and the arbitrariness and inherent frailty of the language Browning himself must use as a tool. Donald S. Hair traces Browning’s ideas on language back to “the dissenting religious tradition in which he was brought up”:

...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,

²⁴ Thomas M. Greene, “Language, Signs and Magic”, in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. By Peter Schafer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p.255- 72 (p. 264).

²⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), Book XI, 7, p.258.

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 into judgement.²⁶

Yet Browning was not altogether content with this humble definition and use of language, he sought the power of the “eternal” Word, and he simulated it in his poetry, while paradoxically acknowledging its unavailability.

The Hebrew Language

Hebrew constituted the ultimate supernatural language for many Christian thinkers because it was supposed to be the original language. The mystical ideas on the Hebrew language, most of which can be found in the Kabbala, claim that the whole world is constructed out of the twenty-two Hebrew characters that constitute building blocks. Browning was acquainted with these beliefs and delved into the subject, and the result of this exploration are the many references to Hebrew and the use of Hebrew in his late works, especially in *Jocoseria* (1883) and *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884). Browning's use of Hebrew in his poems implies that he has a special regard for it and for its powers: it is used in a way which is meant to empower his own poems with divine truth. Nevertheless, the public response did not correspond with his intentions, and the readers found his use of Hebrew tiresome and obscure.

²⁶ Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p.3.

Magic Language

Browning's interest in magic and magicians continued throughout his life, and magic language is a recurring theme in his work. One important factor in the Western idea of magic and in Browning's ideas on it is its ethical status. Magic is traditionally considered blasphemous and evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition, based on an act-centered ethical theory. William Schuyler distinguishes between three ethical systems of judgment:

An *act-centered* theory is one in which rightness or wrongness attaches to the nature of an act performed... The Ten Commandments are a familiar example... A *consequence-centered* theory is one in which only the values of the consequences of an act are taken into account. The nature of the act and the motives for it are ignored. The most familiar example will be utilitarianism. A *motive-centered* theory takes into account only motives, ignoring consequences and natures of acts. Kant's system is a good example²⁷.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the act-centered abnegation of magic is based on the Bible: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"²⁸, but the enthusiasm of the persecution of witches and magicians stems from the threat to Christianity and to authoritative and centralized power. Magic needs a community of believers but it is basically an individualistic and subversive phenomenon. Browning internalized the basic and

²⁷ William Schuyler, "The Ethical Status of Magic", in *Forms of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Third International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film*, ed. by Jan Hokenson and Howard Pearce (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), p.25.

²⁸ *Exodus* 22:18.

conventional conflict between Christianity and magic; nevertheless, his attraction to magic, stemming from the books he encountered in his father's library, drew from him an appraisal of magic that is not always act-centered. In *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello*, the act of magic itself is dismissed as blasphemous, but in "The Flight of the Duchess," "Transcendentalism," "Pietro of Abano," and "Fust and his Friends" the act is condoned and the motives and consequences become crucial in his ethical examination of magic. The gypsy, Hans of Halberstadt, Pietro, and Fust are considered magicians, and the first three do indeed employ magic, yet their motives and the consequences of their acts are presented as positive in the context of the poems. The distinction between black and white magic is used in Christian literature to distinguish between magic that is prohibited and magic that can be condoned by the Christian authorities. Both Agrippa and Boehme believed in magic yet were devout Christians, and suggest that magic and Christianity need not be antithetical. Browning's 1880 poem "Pietro of Abano" illustrates how Browning's own attitude towards magic has developed: Pietro is presented as morally acceptable in spite of his being a magician, and the antithesis of magic and religion as it was presented in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* seems no longer valid.

John

Why is Browning attracted to magic, and what does it represent, on a conscious as well as an unconscious level? In trying to answer this question, I have been influenced by some of the most prominent thinkers on the subject: Freud, Piaget, and O'Keefe's thorough project *Stolen Lightning* that encompasses all the different definitions and aspects of magic.

Firstly, one might distinguish between the personal, psychological level, and the wider social significance and role of magic. Freud discussed both levels, beginning with the personal psychological role of magic, to which the social function corresponds. Freud perceives magic as an expression of the “omnipotence of thought” defined as “the overvaluation of mental processes as compared with reality”, and characterising the narcissistic phase of psychological development²⁹. According to Freud, this state of mind involves the belief that thoughts and wishes have magic power, and the expression of a wish would inevitably lead to its fulfillment. Freud considers the survival of such a state of mind in adults a problem, and one that he discerns in “[p]rimitive men and neurotics”³⁰. Freud’s assumption about ‘primitive’ cultures is that they represent the past of European civilization, rather than being their contemporaries. This popular view he shared with many nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologists, and it is one that Browning holds as well, and most evidently so in *The Return of the Druses*³¹. In this spirit, Freud draws a parallel between the development of the individual and the “development” of humanity:

If we may regard the existence among primitive races of the omnipotence of thoughts as evidence in favour of narcissism, we are encouraged to attempt a comparison between the phases in the development of men’s view of the universe and the stages of an individual’s libidinal development. The animistic phase would correspond to narcissism both chronologically and in its content;

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Pelican Freud Library* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), XIII, p. 145.

³⁰ *Totem and Taboo*, p. 147.

³¹ See chapter 7, “The Language of the Other”.

the religious phase would correspond to the stage of object-choice of which the characteristic is a child's attachment to his parents; while the scientific phase would have an exact counterpart in the stage at which an individual has reached maturity, has renounced the pleasure principle, adjusted himself to reality and turned to the external world for the object of his desires³².

Even though his thesis of cultural development is now totally rejected, Freud's association of magic with the narcissistic stage is still considered a basic tenet in post-Freudian research. What is interesting as far as this thesis is considered is Freud's connection between magic and art:

In only a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art. Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that what he does in play produces emotional effects – thanks to artistic illusion – just as though it were something real. People speak with justice of the 'magic of art' and compare artists to magicians. But the comparison is perhaps more significant than it claims to be. There can be no doubt that art did not begin for art's sake. It worked originally in the service of impulses which are for the most part extinct today. And among them we may suspect the presence of many magical purposes³³

³² *Totem and Taboo*, p.148.

³³ *Totem and Taboo*, p.148-149.

Piaget also attributes magic thought mainly to children, but he also traces “magical ideas” in normal adults. This is how he defines the state:

In fact, during the primitive stages, since the child is not yet conscious of his subjectivity, all reality appears to be of one unvaried type by reason of the confusion between the data of the external world and those of the internal. Reality is impregnated with self and thought is conceived as belonging to the category of physical matter. From the point of view of causality, all the universe is felt to be in communion with and obedient to the self. There is participation and magic. The desires and the commands of the self are felt to be absolute, since the subject’s own point of view is regarded as the only one possible. There is integral egocentricity through lack of consciousness of self³⁴.

This state of mind is similar to the one of Sordello as a child, who doesn’t distinguish between himself and external objects, but it is also the situation of God, whom Browning calls “the Perfect Poet” in *Paracelsus*, because the whole universe is obedient to him. This perfect poet is Shakespeare in the sonnet “The Names”, which once again describes a state of mind in which all figments of the imagination, or works of art, become alive and real. Thus, magic is attractive to Browning because it recalls a narcissistic state of mind in which there is no separation between self and the external world, and his poems and plays constitute a universe of their own.

³⁴ Jean Piaget, *The Child’s Conception of the World*, trans. By Joan and Andrew Tomlinson (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1989), p.167.

Magical language is a subject that runs throughout this thesis, and is tightly linked even to the chapters on Hebrew and the Word. References to magical language abound in Browning's works, but before I begin interpreting them, a definition of magic language is needed. Magic language is a particular instance of supernatural language, therefore I need to add some comments to my initial definition of supernatural language. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, is probably the most influential work in this field, and it discusses magic language in terms of magic sympathy between the word and the referent, and the false power of the magician³⁵. Bronislaw Malinowski claims that magic language is an essential part of magic culture, and that "[m]agical formulae differ from other texts considerably"³⁶. He points to the weirdness of magic language, the unintelligible words that are believed to be pre-human, the mystical power that these words have when used by an accepted magician, the sing-song chant of the magician, and the sociological context of a believing community³⁷.

O'Keefe defines magic language as a manipulation of "symbols of transcendent entities", and discusses the power of single words and magic names, their relation to their referents, and different examples of magical sentences and expressions. All of these researchers employ numerous examples from many cultures to support their definitions of magic language, and these have been very helpful to my understanding of the nature of this language.

³⁵James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Language and Religion*, 2 vols, 3rd ed (New York: Macmillan, 1951), vol 1, part 1, ch. 1,2,3, p. 52-219.

³⁶Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p.213.

³⁷Malinowski, part IV.

Thomas M. Greene extensively studied magic language in his essay “Language, Signs and Magic”³⁸. He distinguishes between a disjunctive theory of language, which “separates sharply word and thing, *verbum* and *res*”, and a conjunctive theory of “natural language whereby the word might be seen to correspond to its referent, or, worse, whereby the word might acquire the power of a thing through identification with its referent”³⁹.

A disjunctive theory is thus apotropaic; it is needed because the opposing theory would conceive of the word as a part of the object’s essence, if not in fact cosubstantial with it, and that theory would make a belief in witchcraft possible. The dangerous idea for these Protestant minds would be a *conjunctive* view of language, the view they perceived to be held by cabalists and papists as well as enchanters⁴⁰.

Greene traces this conjunctive theory in the works of the sixteenth century philosopher and magician Marsilio Ficino, in the work of his follower Pico della Mirandola, in Pico’s contemporary Johannes Reuchlin, and in Cornelius Agrippa’s works a generation later. One might add Paracelsus and Pietro of Abano, subjects of two of Browning’s poems, to this list. Browning had certainly read Agrippa, which he found in his father’s library, and Giovanni Battista della Porta, a sixteenth century

³⁸ Thomas M. Greene, “Language, Signs and Magic”, in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. By Peter Schafer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p.255-272.

³⁹ Greene, p.256.

⁴⁰ Greene, p.256.

occultist, whose work he quotes in one of his letters to Elizabeth Barrett⁴¹. The debate between a disjunctive and a conjunctive theory of language is also an essential part of the controversy between Catholics and reformers.

Much debate in this controversy centered on the precise working of a single sacrament, the Eucharist, and on the question whether the wafer and wine *recall* Christ's body and blood, or whether they *become* literally the body and blood. Once again the question is what kind of gap, if any, separates the representation from the sign⁴².

Browning, who was well acquainted with this religious debate, must have read Luther, who discussed the subject and presented a "wavering between a disjunctive view and a conjunctive"⁴³.

Some light may be shed on Browning's knowledge of these occult theories of language by a claim made by Vivienne Browning, a descendant of the Browning family, that the Browning family had Rosicrucian affiliations⁴⁴. The Rosicrucian fraternity was an esoteric Christian cult which first declared its existence in the seventeenth century, and was accused of being a Satanic cult⁴⁵. Vivienne Browning

⁴¹ Agrippa's works were in the Browning library according to *The Browning Collections*, p.5, della Porta is mentioned in Kintner, *The Letters*, p.484, letter of 21 Feb. 1846. The letter is quoted on p. 4-5.

⁴² Greene, p.259.

⁴³ Greene, p.260.

⁴⁴ Vivienne Browning, *My Browning Family Album* London: Springwood Books, 1979), p.15. Vivienne Browning is biased as far as Browning's relation to occultism is concerned, since her father was a medium and the leader of the Rosicrucians in Australia. Nevertheless, the relevance of her claims makes them worth mentioning.

⁴⁵ Eco, p.180.

tells us that Browning's favourite uncle, Reuben, was a Rosicrucian and had passed his knowledge of the cult to Browning himself. The cult, which was interested in hermetic writings, offered a theory of magic language derived from Boehme⁴⁶. They claimed to be able to read the "Book of Nature" to which Agrippa and Paracelsus referred, and to extract from it a "Magick writing...in the which withall is expressed and declared the Nature of all Things"⁴⁷. Moreover, it is Reuben who introduced Smart, who was also influenced by Hermetic writings, to the young Browning in 1824⁴⁸. Smart's religious poems, including "The Song to David" to which Browning refers in his *Parleyings*, is greatly indebted to kabbalistic ideas which Smart may have been acquainted with from Rosicrucian or Hermetic writings⁴⁹. Thus, if Vivienne Browning's claim is indeed valid, the origin of Browning's interest in and knowledge of occult theories of transcendent language may be explained.

The Debate on the Nature of Language in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

I will define the debate as one between thinkers who conceive of language as containing some supernatural characteristics, and those who conceive it as natural and conventional. The idea of the Word which assumes the divine origin of language, the notion of the divine primacy of Hebrew, and magic language, constitute what I term supernatural language. Supernatural language is far from

⁴⁶ Hugh Ormsby-Lennon, "Rosicrucian Linguistics: Twilight of a Renaissance Tradition", in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. by Ingrid Merkel and Allen Debus (Washington-London-Toronto: Folger Shakespeare Library-Associated University Press, 1988), p. 311-341 (p.314).

⁴⁷ Eco, p.181.

⁴⁸ DeVane, *Browning's Parleyings*, p.93.

⁴⁹ Walsh and Williamson, p.154.

arbitrary and inadequate: it has inherent power, emanating from an unbreakable tie between signified and signifier, and from its role in an overall supernatural scheme.

This cluster of ideas, with the affinities and differences among its different elements, was undermined in the eighteenth century by empiricist philosophy and in the nineteenth century by the emergence of scientific theories on language. The rise of the scientific study of language in the nineteenth century viewed these theories as outmoded and superstitious, and other theories which consider language as arbitrary and conventional were becoming widely accepted by the academic community. The supernatural ideas on language, which were regarded by the educated class as authoritative, were being shifted in the mid-nineteenth century to the literary and religious realms of thought, and totally rejected by the upcoming scientific research on language.

The result of all these developments in the ideas on language is that while Browning was writing his poetry and plays, in the background there was a conflict between two approaches to language. The first attributes supernatural characteristics and/or origin to language, and the second is based on an empirical approach, which claims that language evolved naturally and reduces language to sense data. Thinkers who took the former stand in the nineteenth century were influenced by the doctrine of the Logos and its discussion by the early Christian fathers, as well as medieval Jewish mysticism that infiltrated Christian thought. Coleridge (himself influenced by Kabbalistic and Christian sources) was the major opponent of the popularity of Tooke's reductionism in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Richard Trench, Richard Whately, Nicholas Wiseman, William Whewell, among others, hold

that language has a divine origin, and that words originally contained the essence of the thing they denoted, and that some of the characteristics of that original language God gave humanity are still extant in our own speech.

Nicholas Wiseman, cardinal and Archbishop of Westminster from 1850, was a figure Robert Browning knew of, and “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” is in part based upon his character. In a letter to Edward Chapman written on January 17th, 1856, Browning is interested in the *Rambler*, a Roman Catholic magazine, in which Nicholas Wiseman criticises Browning’s attack on Catholicism and on Wiseman himself in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”⁵⁰. Wiseman’s *Twelve Lectures on the Connexion between Science and Revealed Religion* (1835), a successful publication which appeared in six editions in England by 1859, is among other things an attack on theories on the natural development of language. He claims that Rousseau and Volney who believed that humanity was originally without speech, and that speech was invented at some point in human development, “indulge in the same imagination”⁵¹. Instead, Wiseman reaffirms religious doctrine on the divine origin of speech, and adds a racist hierarchy of languages, namely, that Divine Providence distributed different languages to different nations “so that the mind of a nation must necessarily correspond to the language it possesses”⁵².

Richard Trench, a professor of divinity at King’s college, London, who became Dean of Westminster in 1856 and Archbishop of Dublin in 1863, helped to arouse a

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⁵⁰ *New Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. By William Clyde DeVane and Kenneth Leslie Knickerbocker (London: John Murray, 1951), p. 87.

⁵¹ Nicholas Wiseman, *Twelve Lectures on the Connexion between Science and Revealed Religion*, 2 vols (London: Joseph Booker, 1836), p.13.

⁵² Wiseman, *Twelve Lectures*, p. 139.

general interest in the study of language in England. Robert Browning knew Trench, and Trench had given him four of his books⁵³. In *On the Study of Words* (1851), which reached its nineteenth edition in 1886, Trench adhered to the Bible, but his claim concerning the debate on the origin of language is that the origin of language is “at once divine and human”⁵⁴. God did not give Adam words but rather “the power of naming”:

But the truer answer to the inquiry how language arose, is this, that God gave man language, just as he gave him reason... Yet this must not be taken to affirm that man started at the first furnished with a full-formed vocabulary of words... He did not thus begin the world with names, but with the power of naming: God did not teach him words, as one of us teaches a parrot, from without; but gave him a capacity, and then evoked the capacity which He gave⁵⁵.

Nevertheless words are not arbitrary, for there is a tie between word and thing, which[^] of divine origin:

But it was said just now that words often contain a witness for great moral truths – God having impressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men

⁵³ *The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction*, ed. by Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley (Winfield Kansas and London: The Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, The Browning Institute Inc., Mansell Publishing Limited and Wedgestone Press, 1984), p.197. Robert Browning mentions Trench in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett on August 16th, 1846, in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. By Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis, Vol.10, p.373.

⁵⁴ Richard Chevenix Trench, *On the Study of Words: Lectures*, 6th edn (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1855), p.17.

⁵⁵ *On the Study of Words*, p.16.

are continually uttering deeper things than they know, asserting mighty principles, it may be asserting them against themselves, in words that to them may seem nothing more than the current coin of society⁵⁶.

One of Trench's assumptions about language is very similar to Browning's as it is formulated in many of his poems but most concisely in the last lines of *The Ring and the Book*:

...of the truths of God in the language of men, which language of course includes his acts as well as his words, it may be said, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels," and it must be expected that somewhere or other the earthen vessel will appear, that the imperfection which cleaves to all forms of utterance, which are not purely from spirit to spirit, will make itself felt either by the misapprehensions of those to whom the language is addressed (see John iii. 11,) or by the language itself, though the best that human speech could supply, yet failing to convey the divine truth in all its fulness and completeness⁵⁷.

The frailty of human speech implies in Trench as well as in Browning, that there exists a form of divine language that is beyond human capacity. Indeed, Trench's ideas on language are in some points similar to Jacob Boehme's theory of Adamic language, a

⁵⁶ *On the Study of Words*, p.10.

⁵⁷ *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, London: John W. Parker, 1841, p.16.

theory Browning was acquainted with and refers to in “Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books”⁵⁸.

Archbishop Richard Whately, an influential figure who is mentioned in the Brownings’ correspondence, also held a traditional approach to the subject of the origin of language⁵⁹. In his *On the Origin of Civilization* (1854), Whately resisted the idea of the evolution of European man from the savage, claiming that savages are

[I]gnorant and thoughtless, gross in their tastes, filthy in their habits, with the passions of man, but with the intellect of little children... And they are sunk, for the most part quite as low, morally, as they are intellectually... Even in bodily person they differ greatly from the civilized man⁶⁰.

Whately obviously disagreed with the theory of the natural evolution of language, he rather thought that some “superior Being” instructed and civilized us, and savages have fallen from that civilized state⁶¹.

In 1842 the Philological Society of London was formed, the aim of which was to explore the structures, affinities and history of languages. Many of the 203 members had religious titles. In 1844 when Chambers’s *Vestiges* was published, they found it an

⁵⁸ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, p.232. Boehme and “Transcendentalism” are discussed in chapter 3.

⁵⁹ Whately was a friend of Miss Mitford’s and is mentioned in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, in two letters from Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, June 30th, 1845 (Volume 10, p.283), and August 4th, 1846 (Volume 13, p.224).

⁶⁰ Richard Whately, *On the Origin of Civilization* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1854), p. 3-4.

⁶¹ Whately, *On the Origin*, p. 17.

outrage, and William Whewell's *Indications of the Creator* (1845) was a reply to it⁶². In this book, Whewell claims that "we cannot place the origin of language in any point of view in which it comes under the jurisdiction of natural causation at all", thus placing the origin beyond the grasp of material science⁶³. He ends the book with the same juxtaposition that I have noted in Trench and in Browning, that of the inherent frailty of human speech and the omnipotence of the divine utterance:

And when we recollect how utterly inadequate all human language has been shown to be, to express the nature of that Supreme Cause of the Natural, and Rational, and Moral, and Spiritual world, to which our Philosophy points with trembling finger and shaded eyes, we may receive, with the less wonder but with the more reverence, the declaration which has been vouchsafed to us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God⁶⁴.

Other poets' ideas of supernatural language, besides those of Christopher Smart, are a major influence on Browning. Romantic theories of language endow language with supernatural or 'spiritual' power. In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, primitive, natural language is most poetic and true, and corresponds to the human mind. Anya Taylor, who studied magic and Romanticism, claims that in the late eighteenth century poets begin to search for powerful language, in their resistance to

⁶² Aarsleff, Hans. *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860*. Chapter VI, p. 211-263.

⁶³ William Whewell, *Indications of the Creator: Extracts, bearing upon theology, from the History and the Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (London: John W. Parker, 1845), p.121.

⁶⁴ Whewell, *Indications of the Creator*, p.170-171.

scientific and empirical theories of language and the mind. This movement begins with Gray and Collins, and later Coleridge and Shelley⁶⁵.

The urge – occasionally manifested by poets from Gray to Shelley – to look backward and find some unprovable powers arises from a desire to affirm the existence of spirit, of imagination, and of freedom in the face of exclusively physical hypotheses⁶⁶.

For Coleridge, supernatural language is a significant and recurring theme. The idea of the Logos is central to Coleridge's thought, and he firmly believed that the origin of language is supernatural and God given. The Word is still connected to "words", and the degradation of language is a result of the failure to acknowledge that connection⁶⁷. Coleridge was the representative of the movement against the legacy of Locke's idea of language, trying to reinstate language as a living, overlooked, supernatural phenomenon.

Contrasted with these religious and poetic ideas on the validity of supernatural language, Browning is influenced by claims to the arbitrariness and conventionality of language, claims that date long before the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Both Aristotle and Plato ultimately treated language as conventional, arbitrary, and imperfect. Montaigne wrote in the *Essais*, which Browning had read and held in his

⁶⁵ Anya Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1979), p.2.

⁶⁶ Taylor, p.3.

⁶⁷ See Mary Anne Perkins's *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p.26, and all of Chapter 1.

library, a strong statement against any inherent connection between signified and signifier:

There is the name and the thing: the name is a voice which denotes and signifies the thing; the name is no part of the thing, nor of the substance; 'tis a foreign piece joined to the thing, and outside it⁶⁸.

The arbitrary nature of the tie between signified and signifier is just the first step in the development of the empirical study of language. In nineteenth century England, an influential group of thinkers believed that all language is reducible to sense data, a material view of language that strips it of supernatural affiliations. This group included the Utilitarians, who relied on Locke's theory of language and its development by Tooke in the 18th century. Locke's contribution to the theories that debunk supernatural language is of major importance, as Hans Aarsleff has commented:

I am convinced that Locke's argument about the cheat of words was aimed not so much against the common thing-word habit, which all of us tend to follow in a pragmatic way, but against its much more serious embodiment in the Adamic language doctrine. If there were any truth in it, the word for gold, for instance, might by suitable means be made to reveal the nature and essence

⁶⁸ Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "Of Glory", *The Essays*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins, vol XXV (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p.300. The copy in Browning's library contained numerous notes by him, see *The Browning Collections*, p.140.

of gold, whereas for Locke it was impossible to know more than what he defiantly called the ‘nominal essence’.⁶⁹

Browning was acquainted with Locke’s work, and owned a copy of *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* given to him by his father⁷⁰. Locke absolutely denies language any supernatural origin: the ability to form language was given to humanity by God, but the formation of language was brought about by “voluntary imposition” instigated by the need to communicate⁷¹. Secondly, he claimed that language is, and has always been, a conventional and arbitrary system:

Words, by long and familiar use, as has been said, come to excite in men certain ideas so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose a natural connexion between them. But that they signify only men’s peculiar ideas, and that *by a perfect arbitrary imposition*, is evident, in that they often fail to excite in others (even that use the same language) the same ideas we take them to be signs of: and every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases, that no one hath the power to make others have the same ideas in their minds that he has, when they use the same words that he does⁷².

In this claim, which Locke repeats, he actually debunks all theories of the divine

⁶⁹ Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure : Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History*, (London: Athlone Press, 1982), p.26.

⁷⁰ *The Browning Collections*, p.125.

⁷¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 35, Book III, Chap. II, 1, p.253.

⁷² *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Book III, Chap.II, 8, p.254-5.

origin of language, whose basic tenet is the mystical connection between signified and signifier. For Locke, even the Name of God, regarded as the most powerful word in Jewish and Christian mysticism, is merely conventional, and has absolutely nothing to do with God himself.⁷³ His insistence on the natural development of language and on its arbitrary and voluntary character, suggests an uneasiness and uncertainty in human communication, and consequently, in the poet's mind. Browning is well aware of this uncertainty, accepting it on the one hand, but conjuring the other, more "sure" language on the other.

Thomas Carlyle, like many nineteenth century thinkers, did not think highly of Locke's philosophy⁷⁴. In his essay on Goethe in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* he writes

Locke, himself a clear, humble-minded, patient, reverent, nay, religious man, had paved the way for banishing religion from the world⁷⁵.

It seems plausible that Browning, who was Carlyle's friend and admirer, might have agreed with him. Horne Tooke, the most influential linguist in nineteenth century England, based his own study of language on some of Locke's assumptions. He held that all language could be reduced to nouns, and perhaps verbs, and his goal was to use etymology in order to simplify language and get rid of redundancy and faultiness. The Brownings owned a copy of Tooke's most famous book, *Winged*

⁷³ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, ch.III, 9, p.114.

⁷⁴ Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, p.121.

⁷⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), vol 1, p.251.

Words, and Robert was in all likelihood acquainted with Tooke's influential theory.

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Tooke's attempt to reduce all language to sensations appealed to the radical philosophers in the nineteenth century, and they adopted his theory wholeheartedly and uncritically. His reputation in England in the first third of the nineteenth century was remarkable, and it kept off the influence of the continental new philology⁷⁶.

The positivists who claim that sentences that cannot be empirically proven are meaningless⁷⁷, and the emerging science of linguistics in England in the 1840s, both seem to deprive language of its spiritual significance and power. Moreover, the evolutionary theories that trace the origin of language to animal cries certainly demote language. Robert Chambers in his *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), and Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) emphasise the natural origin of language, and its existence, in a more basic form, in animal communication as well.

Chambers believed that although language developed gradually and naturally, the capacity to create language is God-given, for the physical and mental situation in which language was created was 'as likely to produce sounds as an Eolian harp placed in a draught is to produce tones'⁷⁸. Like Chambers, Max Müller believed in the natural origin of language, but as part of a divine providence. Robert Browning knew Max Müller, and possessed a copy of Müller's *La Carità of Andrea del Sarto*,

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⁷⁶ Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England*, p.73.

⁷⁷ Two books containing Comte's philosophy were published in England in 1853, Lewes's *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* and Martineau's translation of *The Philosophy of Comte* (From Woolford and Karlin's *Robert Browning*, p. 302).

⁷⁸ Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (London: John Churchill, 1844), p.217.

which Müller had inscribed: “Robert Browning, from an old admirer and debtor, F. Max Müller, 1887”⁷⁹. Müller’s scientific approach implies a rejection of the idea of the divine origin of language:

Theologians who claim for language a divine origin drift into the most dangerous anthropomorphism...they suppose the deity to have compiled a dictionary and grammar in order to teach them to the first man⁸⁰.

Philosophers, on the contrary, who imagine that the first man, though left to himself, would gradually have emerged from a state of mutism...forget that man could not by his own power have acquired the *faculty* of speech which is the distinctive character of mankind⁸¹.

Browning sides with the dualists rather than with the materialists, but there is no sign of a belief in the divine origin of language in any of his works. I would rather place him with Max Müller and Robert Chambers who believed that language developed naturally, but reflects human reason and is part of a divine plan. Browning adopts the traditional dichotomy of omnipotent, supernatural language on the one hand, and inadequate, incompetent human language on the other, a dichotomy we have seen in Trench, Whewell and Whately. Nevertheless, his play with the Word, with Hebrew, and with magic language in his poems and plays ultimately reflect a reluctance to accept that traditional dichotomy as final.

⁷⁹ *The Browning Collections*, p.144.

⁸⁰ Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1866), p.382.

⁸¹ *Lectures on the Science of Language*, p. 383.

Supernatural Languages as Speech Genres

Yet how does one discern magic language, or the Word in Browning's works? Beyond the obvious references to the ineffable name, the use of Hebrew and the Word in the texts, I have also used a wider definition of these supernatural references relying on Bakhtin's idea of "speech genres". In his "The Problem of Speech Genres", Bakhtin claims that notwithstanding "the national unity of language", each area of human activity is characterized by at least one "speech genre" which determines the thematic as well as the linguistic style of the utterances made within that sphere of communication.

Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects - thematic content, style, and compositional structure - are inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively*

stable types of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*⁸².

In the essay, Bakhtin claims that any linguistic study is incomplete if it does not take into consideration the different styles of communication that constitute each speech genre. Because so many speech genres exist, and because some of them are flexible, they seem abstract and amorphous, yet Bakhtin believed that they should be analysed and defined in order fully to understand human communication. He distinguishes between primary and secondary speech genres.

Secondary (complex) speech genres - novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth - arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the processes of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others. For example, rejoinders of everyday dialogue or letters found in a novel retain their form and their everyday significance only on the plane of the novel's content. They enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life.

The novel as a whole is an utterance just as rejoinders in everyday dialogue or

⁸² M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p.60.

private letters are (they do have a common nature), but unlike these, the novel is a secondary (complex) utterance⁸³.

The form of the dramatic monologue can be defined in these terms. It is a kind of communication that assumes an imaginary speaker, that is, no realistic origin/subject. As Browning writes in one of his letters to Elizabeth, unlike her, he is never the speaker in the poems. The dramatic monologue creates a subject out of nothing, as supernatural language creates or summons an object that was not there beforehand. Browning's use of supernatural speech genres in his poems is an attempt to anchor the monologue in some transcendent origin, whereas the paradox is that it remains within the bounds of a narrative that lacks a fixed and realistic origin.

Having discussed the dramatic monologue as a secondary speech genre, it is clear that each dramatic monologue contains primary speech genres determined by the speaker's profession and social milieu. The speech genres I am interested in are those of magic language, God's language, and original language. These are sometimes self-evident, as in the case of Hebrew or in the case of phrases attributed to divine speakers, such as God or Jesus. In the case of magic language, some of the utterances are presented as spells or incantations and are therefore self-evident as well, but some are recognised according to style and content. Anya Taylor as well as Malinowski and Frazer have characterised magic language and I have followed their definitions as well as my own intuition.

⁸³ *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, p.61-62.

Browning's Forms

Of all the forms Browning used, the one most associated with him and intimately connected to his philosophy is the dramatic monologue. The adoption of this form emanated from his earlier experiments with narrative poems, lyrical poems, and plays. The dramatic monologue is a form that involves a construction of a temporary subject/speaker, and is therefore basically an utterance divided from an "origin". The form implies that the reader is aware that he or she is reading a text that cannot be attributed to a 'real' person, including the author, and that the addressee is also imaginary.

In his discussion of this issue, Warwick Slinn bases his thesis on Derrida's argument that the speaker does not exist as an origin outside of the text, but is rather situated within the text itself.

In reading monologues we are required, I think, to shift our focus, not to read language as an expression of a speaker's character, as a representation of belief, but to follow the processes by which a "character" (a term which obviously takes on a new definition) is constituted in language... To become a subject in this manner is to become aware that an event is occurring in a particular mental and physical location, so that place, context - mental, social and historical - is at once established as part of the constitution of the self, and yet is immediately disrupted as the utterance is given up to time, to the temporal processes of discourse - the child orphaned at its birth, in Derridean image. A subject exists, then, as a paradox of language, at the focal and fading point of forces which bring into being the subject-of-consciousness at the very

moment in which they bring about its death. Such a drama is at the heart of the dramatic process in Browning's monologues, and it is a drama which is fully part of their function as speech acts. Indeed, it is dependent on that function⁸⁴.

In spite of this "drama", I have attempted to trace the poems back to Browning's consciousness and subconsciousness, in my exploration of Browning's own drama about the nature of language in general and poetic language in particular. Warwick Slinn's approach might be mitigated by Ann Wordsworth, who insists on a more humanistic approach, and refuses to see the dramatic monologue as a disconnected utterance. Wordsworth summarises Harold Bloom's approach to Browning's work:

In Bloom's account, poetic work is psychically invested, like the dream work, and its processes, analogised as a system of effects stemming separately and simultaneously from image, trope and defence, build into the poem *space* which has no representational function and which can't be read through biographical, historical or experiential inferences... What Bloom teaches is a kind of close reading which rejects interventions from outside the invested language of the poem, from psychbiographical, historical, experiential sources, but which, unlike the readings of the New Critics, still posits a structure of intentionality, a psycho-poetics which constitutes and organises the work⁸⁵.

Browning, who wished to be an "objective poet", like Shakespeare, wanted his men and women to come alive, like Shakespeare's "creation" in the sonnet "the Names",

⁸⁴ Warwick slinn, "Some Notes on Monologues as Speech Acts", *BSN*, 15 (1985), p.1-9.

⁸⁵Ann Wordsworth, "Communication Different", *BSN*, 13 (1983), 4-18 (p.12).

or like the rose in "Transcendentalism". Nevertheless, the anxiety that his characters would not "rise" is always lurking in the background, embodied in the breaking of the illusion of the dramatic monologue, and the reader's realization that there is a void behind the speaker, rather than a real origin. With this anxiety in mind, supernatural language comes into play in Browning's work, as the embodiment of perfect poetic language which creates, and in the poem itself, a technique which might suspend the reader's disbelief, and postpone the disruption and death of the constructed self.

Magical Language in Browning's Early Works

References to magic and magicians abound in Browning's poetry, from his first published poem *Pauline* to poems written in his old age. Browning had read Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* in an anthology of treatises on magic in his father's library, and used the introduction to the work as the motto for his first published work, *Pauline*¹. For his second long poem he chose the subject of the life of Paracelsus, a sixteenth century physician and occultist who was interested in alchemy and hermetic writings. *Sordello* contains many references to the occult, as do *Bells and Pomegranates*, *Men and Women*, *Dramatis Personae*, *the Ring and the Book*, and his late *Asolando*. What emerges from Browning's references to magic throughout his career is a complex and ambivalent attitude towards magic: a fascination with magic and magicians on the one hand, and a rejection of magic as unchristian and primitive on the other.

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The study of Browning's views on magical language encompasses a wide variety of issues that pertain to the essence of his poetics. His interest in magical language emanates from his quest for a language more powerful than that fallen, deficient speech he believes has been assigned to humanity.

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Therefore, he toys with various supernatural languages, one of which is magic language, searching for a language which can enthrall and mesmerise an

¹ Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, p. 210

audience, in spite of his awareness that theoretically, such a quest can never be fulfilled. The subject of magic language touches on the relationship between poet and reader as Browning envisages it: the impossible task of alluring whilst teaching the readers without claiming the poet's superiority over them. In many of his poems, Browning chose to explore the relationship between the poet and his readers in terms of the relationship between a magician and his audience. The appeal of the metaphor lies in the comparison between poetry and the magician's powerful language, a language that claims to be able to assume power over an audience with its spells and charms. Thus, I will be studying Browning's references to magical language with regard to his ideas on the relationship between the poet and his audience and to his conception of language as they emerge from his poetry and plays.

I shall discern three concerns in Browning's attitude towards magic: the first is symbolical magic, which is concerned with the search for truth and knowledge, and is the most elevated form of magic in Browning's works. The social aspect of magic refers to the relationship between the magician and his followers, and is usually a metaphor for the relationship between the poet and his audience. The third kind of magic is the instrumental, which is the lowest, the most despicable kind of magic, and can be found in "Mesmerism" and "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'".

Pauline

In *Pauline*, Browning's first published work, Browning's ambivalence towards magic language and its relation to poetry is already manifested. The speaker's

sinful and unchristian past is associated with magic, yet the motto from Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* suggests that Browning wishes his poetry to resemble the powerful language of magic. This ambivalence is linked to Browning's relation to Shelley and his works, and I will therefore discuss Shelley's references to magic in "The Witch of Atlas", "Alastor", and "Queen Mab". Browning's confused idea of poetic language reflects his being torn between Shelley's influence and his own religious beliefs.

In the process of Browning's formation of his private definition of powerful poetic language, Shelley's ideas play a major role, and an especially conspicuous one in Browning's early poetry. Frederick Pottle shows that Browning read the Benbow edition of Shelley's poetry, entitled "Miscellaneous Poems" which came out in 1826². The Benbow edition did not contain "The Witch of Atlas", and "Alastor", but did contain "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", and "Mont Blanc". Soon afterwards Browning's mother bought him "Queen Mab"³. In a letter to T. J. Wise dated from March 3, 1886, we learn that Browning had possessed all of Shelley's works, including Shelley's early editions, by 1830, that is, three years before *Pauline* was published⁴. We can therefore assume that Browning was already well acquainted with the entire scope of Shelley's work and thought when he was writing *Pauline*. The subject of magic recurs in Shelley's poetry and is blended into his philosophy. Almost all of Shelley's biographers mention Shelley's

² Frederick A. Pottle, *Shelley and Browning: A Myth and Some Facts* (Chicago: The Pembroke Press, 1923), p.23.

³ DeVane, *Handbook*, p.9.

⁴ Pottle, p.18.

strong attraction to the occult⁵. In his youth in Eton, Shelley experimented in magic and necromancy, and was found summoning spirits in churchyards at night⁶. Another biographer claims that Shelley tried to fuse magic with chemistry at Eton, in his attempts to raise the devil⁷.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
 Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
 I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
 I was not heard - I saw them not -
 When musing deeply on the lot
 Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
 All vital things that wake to bring
 News of buds and blossoming, -
 Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;
 I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!⁸
 ("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", 49-60)

⁵ For an example see Carl Grabo's *The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), p.9.

⁶ A.M.D. Hughes, *The Nascent Mind of Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), p.15.

⁷ Jean Overton Fuller, *Shelley: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p.23.

⁸ All the quotations from Shelley are from *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

Thus, these early experiments in magic mentioned in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” develop throughout his life into a more abstract interest. Magic becomes a metaphor for poetry and a major element in Shelley’s idea of the Power of the universe. Shelley undermines the traditional Christian conflict between God and magic - for him, magic is an inherent part of his idea of God.

Queen Mab is the “Queen of Spells”, who rides in a magic car spreading charms (63). Her palace contains a “Hall of Spells”(42) and her aim is to fight against “Man’s evil nature” (76): selfishness, religion, lust, wealth, slavery, tyranny, etc. The whole poem is an argument against religion and tyranny, with the idea of magic, embodied in Queen Mab, presented as a power fighting against these ‘evils’. Mab declares the true god as a universal “Spirit of Activity and Life” - it is the “Power” which is indifferent to humanity, and Queen Mab seems to be one of its agents (148, 197). She is responsible for the future transformation of the world into a world of equality and love (107-8). “The Witch of Atlas” is a similarly positive figure, a beautiful, attractive witch, who improves the world with her spells and rights wrongs. In stanza eighteen her image merges with that of the poet: she is an artist who deals with poetry and the magic scrolls.

In “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Alastor”, the poet craves for spells and charms that would transform the present world:

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever

To sage or poet these responses given -

Therefore the name of God and ghosts and Heaven,
 Remain the records of their vain endeavour,
 Frail spells - whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
 From all we hear and all we see,
 Doubt, chance, and mutability.

("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" 25-31)

O, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,
 Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam
 With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale
 From vernal blooms fresh fragrance! O, that God,
 Profuse of poisons, would concede the chalice
 Which but one living man has drained, who now,
 Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels
 No proud exemption in the blighting curse
 He bears, over the world wanders for ever,
 Lone as incarnate death! O, that the dream
 Of dark magician in his visioned cave,
 Raking the cinders of a crucible
 For life and power, even when his feeble hand
 Shakes in its last decay, were the true law
 Of this so lovely world!

("Alastor" 672-86)

Thus, "Queen Mab" and "The Witch of Atlas" are a fulfillment of this wish for magic, for it is the power that ameliorates the human condition. Alchemy as a metaphor recurs in "A Defence of Poetry", which was published only in 1840 and therefore could not have been read by Browning by the time he wrote *Pauline*. Nevertheless, it underlines Shelley's analogy of poetry and magic:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.

Shelley embraces magic not merely as a metaphor: magic is real, and its power imbues poetry in a movement towards a better world. Anya Taylor who has widely explored the subject of magic in Romantic poetry, claims that Shelley's magic language is recruited to transform the world on an actual, political level, into a world of equality and love⁹. Browning's ambiguous attitude towards Shelley's wholly positive view of magic is the subject of my discussion of

⁹ Anya Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1979), ch. 6.

Pauline. Whereas for Shelley magic implies a movement towards morality and anthropocentric atheism, Browning is still in thrall to the traditional negative connotations of magic that he had absorbed with his Christian education. For Browning, magic involves immorality and blasphemous anthropocentrism on the one hand, but it is associated with Shelley's allure and appeal on the other. Accordingly, at the time he wrote *Pauline*, Browning finds it hard to reconcile Shelley's unchristian attitude toward magic with his admiration towards him.

Although *Pauline* certainly refers to Shelley's work as a whole, "Alastor" seems to have the most in common with it. "Alastor" was completed in 1815, and was Shelley's first major achievement. Like the speaker of *Pauline* (and the hero of *Paracelsus* as well), the speaker is "a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic...[h]e drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate"¹⁰ The poem involves a significant woman, who might save the speaker due to her intellectual and moral exquisiteness as well as beauty, and the speakers of both *Pauline* and "Alastor" die at the end, their quest a failure. Browning changes the form to that of the dramatic monologue, and thus the poet who presents himself in the first two stanzas of "Alastor" is merged with the protagonist himself in *Pauline*. The two speakers show a similarity as early as in the first lines.

Mother of this unfathomable world!

¹⁰ "Preface" to "Alastor", p. 14.

Favour my solemn song, for I have loved
 Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched
 Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
 And my heart ever gazes on the depth
 Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
 In charnels and on coffins, where black death
 Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
 Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
 Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
 Thy messenger, to render up the tale
 Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,
 When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
 Like an inspired and desperate alchemist
 Staking his very life on some dark hope,
 Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
 With my most innocent love, until strange tears
 Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
 Such magic as compels the charmed night
 To render up thy charge:

(18-37)

Likewise, in the opening lines of *Pauline* we learn that the speaker has been in a quest for nature's "secrets" and "enchantments", and has "learned the spell which can call up the dead" (19-21). The speaker of *Pauline* seems to be more successful at this than the speaker of "Alastor", to whom nature has not yet

revealed its “inmost sanctuary”. Yet for Shelley’s speaker the search for truth through magic is the only option at this point, whereas the *Pauline* poet wishes to give up on the practice of magic, and is ashamed of it. Indeed, unlike Shelley who let magic go because it was ineffectual, and therefore transferred it to a philosophical level, Browning ultimately rejects magic in *Pauline* because it is immoral. Yet his attraction towards magic remains, and only later on in his career does he manage to embrace this love without compunction, in “Pietro of Abano”, for example.

In the poem, magic and magical language are associated with the speaker's selfish and immoral past, the past for which he is contrite. The subject of powerful magical language is mentioned in the motto from Agrippa (which I discuss in detail later), and reappears in the first stanza of the poem. The speaker is referring to his "sleepless brood of fancies" and "wild thought[s]" (6,14):

Yet till I have unlocked them it were vain
 To hope to sing; some woe would light on me;
 Nature would point at one whose quivering lip
 Was bathed in her enchantments, whose brow burned
 Beneath the crown to which her secrets knelt;
 Who learnt the spell which can call up the dead,
 And then departed, smiling like a fiend
 Who has deceived God, - if such one should seek
 Again her altars and stand robed and crowned

Amid the faithful! Sad confession first,
 Remorse and pardon and old claims renewed,
 Ere I can be - as I shall be no more.

(16-27)

Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession, is a confession for a past sin. The speaker depicts his sinful period, for which he now feels remorse, using an image of one who employs magic spells and ~~enthralls~~ *controls* the 'secrets of nature'.

Browning here reiterates the traditional dichotomy between God and the devil that is so uncharacteristic of Shelley's thought. Moreover, the magic which Shelley sought to wield in Eton and the "dark magician" he craves in "Alastor" are here condemned and rejected as immoral.

I have felt this in dreams - in dreams in which
 I seemed the fate from which I fled; I felt
 A strange delight in causing my decay.
 I was a fiend in darkness chained for ever
 Within some ocean-cave; and ages rolled,
 Till through the cleft rock, like a moonbeam, came
 A white swan to remain with me;

(96-102)

And then I was a young witch whose blue eyes,
 As she stood naked by the river springs,
 Drew down a god: I watched his radiant form

Growing less radiant, and it gladdened me;
 Till one morn, as he sat in the sunshine
 Upon my knees, singing to me of heaven,
 He turned to look at me, ere I could lose
 The grin with which I viewed his perishing:
 And he shrieked and departed and sat long
 By his deserted throne, but sunk at last
 Murmuring, as I kissed his lips and curled
 Around him, 'I am still a god - to thee.'

(112-123)

This image reveals a tension between the alluring power of magic and magical language for the poet and its 'fiendishness' and destructiveness. The assumption in lines 18-21 is that 'spells' and 'enchantments' underlie the workings of nature, yet the speaker is willing to forego this knowledge in order to try and be what he can be no more:

And if, that done, I can be young again,
 I will give up all gained, as willingly
 As one gives up a charm which shuts him out
 From hope or part or care in human kind.

(127-130)

"Charm" here is used as a simile for his destructive gain of knowledge. Thus, the interest in magic is necessarily blasphemous and involves a killing of a god

or self-destruction. The story of the speaker of Pauline is strikingly similar to the story of *Paracelsus*: both decide to gain knowledge and thus forsake God and become entangled in their own blasphemous search for divine power.

My powers were greater: as some temple seemed
 My soul, where naught is changed and incense rolls
 Around the altar, only God is gone
 And some dark spirit sitteth in his seat.
 So, I passed through the temple and to me
 Knelt troops of shadows, and they cried 'Hail, king!
 We serve thee now and thou shalt serve no more!
 Call on us, prove us, let us worship thee!
 And I said 'Are ye strong? Let fancy bear me
 Far from the past!' And I was borne away,
 As Arab birds float sleeping in the wind,
 O'er deserts, towers and forests, I being calm.
 And I said 'I have nursed up energies,
 They will prey on me.' And a band knelt low
 And cried 'Lord, we are here and we will make
 Safe way for thee in thy appointed life!
 But look on us!' And I said 'Ye will worship
 Me; should my heart not worship too?' They shouted
 'Thyself, thou art our king!' So, I stood there
 Smiling —oh, vanity of vanities!

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The Faustian element here is strong, as it is in *Paracelsus*. Robert Preyer tries to explain the source of this allusion. “The poet and the alchemist became almost interchangeable figures in the literature of the spiritual confession”, he claims, and points to Faust, Paracelsus, and Michael Scott on whom Coleridge planned a work, and “a host of others” who belong to this genre¹¹. In this genre, poetry provides a link between the rational and the emotional/mythical. “*Pauline*”, claims Preyer, is “a variant on the genre we have been discussing”¹². Indeed, the allusions to magic in relation to the speaker’s past continue throughout the poem:

Pauline, could I but break the spell!

(698)

...I am knit round

As with a charm by sin and lust and pride

(847)

...ends

Foul to be dreamed of, smiled at me as fixed

And fair, while others changed from fair to foul

¹¹ Robert Preyer, “Robert Browning: A Reading of the Early Narratives” in *Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Philip Drew (London: Methuen & Co, 1966), p. 157-175, (p.163).

¹² Maynard, *Browning’s Youth*, p. 210

As a young witch turns an old hag at night.

(943-6)

E'en in my brightest time, a lurking fear

Possessed me: I well knew my weak resolves,

I felt the witchery that makes mind sleep

Over its treasure...

(995-998)

Both the attraction towards what magic represents and its ultimate rejection are expressed. What does Browning place at the other extreme? What saves the speaker from this destructive attraction? Obviously, Pauline, the "Sun-treader", and what they are supposed to stand for, namely, "God and truth/ And love", are the positive forces contrasted with the sinful past steeped in magic.

And my choice fell

Not so much on a system as a man -

On one, whom praise of mine shall not offend,

Who was as calm as beauty, being such

Unto mankind as thou to me, Pauline, -

...

Since, song-inwoven, lurked there words which seemed

A key to a new world, the muttering

Of angels, something yet unguessed by man.

(404-416)

This divine language, “the muttering/ Of angels”, which “seemed” to break the barriers of human language, refers to the mystic language which the speaker, as well as Paracelsus crave. “I...consider Shelley’s poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal”, claims Browning in the “Essay on Shelley” of 1851. As Robert Preyer has maintained, Browning attributed to Shelley the mystic vision which was the lot of Hermes, Boehme, and Swedenborg, and I can add Christopher Smart, Paracelsus and Pietro of Abano to this list. At this point in his life, the dubious status of these theories as far as Christianity is concerned was a problem for Browning. Indeed, in spite of Browning’s claim, both in *Pauline* and in the “Essay on Shelley”, that Shelley (despite his atheism, which Browning sees as transient and inessential) belongs to the forces of love and goodness, a closer look at *Pauline* reveals that Shelley’s influence is at least partly to blame for the speaker’s downfall:

Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!

Thou art gone from us; years go by and spring

Gladdens and the young earth is beautiful,

Yet thy songs come not, other bards arise,

But none like thee: they stand, thy majesties,
 Like mighty works which tell some spirit there
 Hath sat regardless of neglect and scorn,
 Till, its long task completed, it hath risen
 And left us, never to return, and all
 Rush in to peer and praise when all in vain.
 The air seems bright with thy past presence yet,
 But thou art still for me as thou hast been
 When I have stood with ~~you~~ as on a throne *thee /*
 With all thy dim creations gathered round
 Like mountains, and I felt of mould like them,
 And with them creatures of my own were mixed,
 Like things half-lived, catching and giving life.
 But thou art still for me who have adored
 Though single, panting but to hear thy name
 Which I believed a spell to me alone,
 Scarce deeming thou wast as a star to men!
 As one should worship long a sacred spring . . .

(151-172)

Both Shelley, the sun-treader, and Pauline are more complex and ambiguous images than they would seem at first. The Faustian image of the throne and the servants surrounding it of lines 469-488 recurs here. The speaker shares the throne with Shelley, and the slaves are both their “dim creations”. Whereas in the later, more obviously Faustian scene, the two rulers are the “dark spirit”

and the speaker's own spirit, here we have Shelley and the speaker. But the speaker worships as well as is being worshipped, and his adoration of Shelley holds within it Faustian connotations as well. The speaker pants "but to hear thy name", and his name is "a spell". The importance of names in necromancy and magic is well known to Browning, from Agrippa's work from which the epigraph was taken, if not from Paracelsus or other mystical works. Moreover, the "troops of shadows" which shout, "Hail, king!" to the speaker's soul in line 474, are here replaced by the speaker crying:

"Yet, sun-treader, all hail! From my heart's heart
I bid thee Hail! E'en in my wildest dreams,
I proudly feel I would have thrown to dust
The wreaths of fame which seemed o'erhanging me,
To see thee for a moment as thou art.

(201-5)

Shelley is again like a god or a demon that the speaker would do anything to get a glimpse of. The similarity between these two scenes and the Faustian images in both serves to present Shelley as a dark attraction and not a merely positive one as it seems at first. Indeed, it seems that Shelley's poetry, although the speaker says "adieu" to it shortly before his fall, steered the speaker to his ultimate destruction (448-468). Shelley's ideas are those who suggested to him the extent of his inner powers, for "Men were to be as gods and earth as heaven" (426). Thus, worshipping Shelley soon turned to magic rituals and self-worship.

The repellency of magic throughout the poem is inconsistent with the epigraph that is a defense of magic. The epigraph is a strange surprise: whereas throughout the poem Browning builds a dualism of magic and religion, in the epigraph Agrippa had actually meant to undermine this dualism, and to show that the magician is not an enemy to religion, but a priest and a prophet¹³. In the body of the poem, the allusions to magic have Faustian connotations and its immorality is unquestioned. The epigraph casts a doubt over the poem's firmness in its moral decision and divulges Browning's ultimate ambivalence towards magic, and the assertion that the conflict is certainly not over yet. Agrippa's message to the reader, taken from his *De Occulta Philosophia*, contains a warning to the overly "conscientious" reader who is repelled by magic, not to proceed reading his writings, for "they are pernicious and full of poison; the gate of Acheron is in this book;"¹⁴. Browning's choice of a renowned magician as the author of his epigraph would suggest that he wishes to make a comparison between himself and Agrippa, and between *Pauline* and Agrippa's book of "forbidden things". Yet this comparison is qualified, since Browning chose to omit all the passages which bore directly on magic, in which Agrippa tries to vindicate it from accusations of superstition and devilishness. The parts Browning chose to leave out are just as revealing as the ones he actually quoted:

¹³ Browning read *De Occulta Philosophia* in an anthology of treatises on magic, the property of Sir Kenelm Digby, in his father's library (John Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, p.210)

¹⁴ My source is Woolford and Karlin's *The Poems of Browning*, vol. 1, p.27-28. The passage was translated in the 17th century.

I do not doubt but the title of our book [of Occult Philosophy, or of magic,] may by the rarity of it allure many to read it, amongst which, some of a disordered judgment...by their rash ignorance, may [take the name of Magic in the worse sense and], though scarce having seen the title, cry out that I teach forbidden [Arts], sow the seeds of heresies, offend the pious, and scandalize excellent wits; [that I am a sorcerer, and superstitious and devilish, who indeed am a Magician: to whom I answer, that a Magician doth not, amongst learned men, signify a sorcerer or one that is superstitious or devilish; but a wise man, a priest, a prophet...and that Magicians, as wise men, by the wonderful secrets of the world, knew Christ, the author of the world, to be born, and came first of all to worship him; and that the name of Magic was received by philosophers, commended by divines, and is not unacceptable to the Gospel.]¹⁵

In attempting to attribute power and importance to his first published poem, Browning compares it to a work which contains charms and spells and therefore is supposed to have an inherent and mystical effect on its readers. Yet having evoked this metaphor of the magician as poet and poetry as powerful language, why does Browning choose to play it down? As I have shown, Browning feels uncomfortable with this association of his work with magic for religious and moral reasons, as *Pauline*, as well as other poems of his, illustrate. To conclude, the motto is incompatible with the message of the

¹⁵Woolford and Karlin, *The Poems of Browning*, vol. 1, p.27-28.

poem as a whole, at least as far as the relation between magic and poetry is concerned. The poem evinces a thematic connection between magic and the speaker's reprobate past, yet always within the bounds of a metaphor or a simile, which serve to distance magic from the speaker's unknown sin. Just like the qualified association of the poem with magical language and Browning with Agrippa in the epigraph, a connection between the speaker/poet's sinful past and magic is both intimated and disallowed.

In addition to this plot, there is the sub-plot of language. The poem exhibits one of Browning's recurring poetic interests: the inefficacy of language. The idea that language cannot express the ideas revealed to the poet's imagination is mentioned in *Pauline* as well as in *Paracelsus*:

...I but catch

A hue, a glance of what I sing: so, pain
 Is linked with pleasure, for I ne'er may tell
 Half the bright sights which dazzle me; but now
 Mine shall be all the radiance: let them fade
 Untold - others shall rise as fair, as fast!
 And when all's done, the few dim gleams transferred,'-
 (For a new thought sprang up how well it were,
 Discarding shadowy hope, to weave such lays
 As straight encircle men with praise and love,
 So, I should not die utterly, - should bring
 One branch from the gold forest, like the knight

Of old tales, witnessing I had been there) -

(516-528)

Behind this feeling of the inadequacy of language is the desire to find “words” that “shall move men like a swift wind” - powerful language which will grant the poet immortality and the desired “influence poets have o’er men”(533-4, 530). But the speaker feels that his attempts at this are a “mockery” (538)

And my soul’s idol ever whispers me

To dwell with him and his unhonoured song:

(540-1)

Magic offers powerful language, secret spells and enchantments, which the poet desires, yet all of these are the shameful alternatives. Having rejected these, the speaker still has some hopes for a magic language sanctioned by God, something like “the muttering/ Of angels” (415-6):

...and I shall live

With poets, calmer, purer still each time,

And beauteous shapes will come for me to seize,

And unknown secrets will be trusted me

Which were denied the waverer once; but now

I shall be priest and prophet as of old.

(1014-1019)

These “unknown secrets” replace the “enchantments” and “secrets” of the opening lines, and the hopes of achieving powerful supernatural language without being blasphemous or resorting to magic are rekindled. Nevertheless, the conflict reappears in an almost identical form in *Paracelsus*, and thus this tension still lives on in Browning’s thought.

Paracelsus

The theme of magic language reemerges in Browning's interpretation of this sixteenth century occultist's biography. While Aprile laments the inadequacy of ordinary language, Paracelsus presents an attractive yet blasphemous solution to this problem: he embodies the poet's wish to appropriate all-powerful language, and to have the secrets of the world at his disposal. Although Browning orchestrates Paracelsus's failure, the romantic in him identifies with his sacrilegious quest.

The connection between magical language and the quest for ultimate knowledge embodied in the 'secrets of nature' recurs in *Paracelsus* in a more direct fashion than in *Pauline*, yet the references to the subject of magic are sparse. Browning chose the historical figure of Paracelsus with the knowledge that occult sciences were his major interest, as the note he appends to the poem clearly shows. The note includes Paracelsus's biography as extracted from the *Biographie Universelle*, which describes Paracelsus as steeped in magic and alchemy from his youth onwards. Yet the allusions to magic in the

poem itself are surprisingly scarce; Browning chooses to place magic in the background, leaving the concrete aspects of Paracelsus's employment of magic to the reader's imagination. Still, Paracelsus's changing attitudes towards magic signal the different stages in his development. In ~~Book~~ *Part* 1, Paracelsus discloses his ambition to acquire ultimate knowledge of man and the universe, yet without the aid of magic:

This for the faith in which I trust; and hence
 I can abjure so well the idle arts
 These pedants strive to learn and teach; Black Arts,
 Great Works, the Secret and Sublime, forsooth -
 Let others prize : too intimate a tie
 Connects me with our God! A sullen fiend
 To do my bidding, fallen and hateful sprites
 To help me - what are these, at best, beside
 God helping, God directing everywhere,
 So that the earth shall yield her secrets up,
 And every object there be charged to strike,
 Teach, gratify her master God appoints?
 (I, 356-366)

As in *Pauline*, the speaker is on a quest for the acquisition of the secrets of nature, but this time there is no doubt concerning the status of magic in the poem: within the bounds of the poem, magic is treated literally, not

metaphorically. The protagonist is a historical magician, and the conflict involving magic in *Pauline* is invigorated.

When still in the religious phase of "Paracelsus Aspires", there is an anachronistic allusion to Christopher Smart, who is brought up as a model by the young Paracelsus. In Paracelsus's argument that "Truth is within ourselves", he claims that truth sometimes emerges from within "When sickness breaks the body", and "oftenest death's approach" (726, 768-9). Smart, though not mentioned by name, is given as an example of this, in lines which foreshadow Browning's later "Parleying with Christopher Smart".

...One man shall crawl

Through life surrounded with all stirring things,
 Unmoved; and he goes mad: and from the wreck
 Of what he was, by his wild talk alone,
 You first collect how great a spirit he hid.
 Therefore, set free the soul alike in all,
 Discovering the true laws by which the flesh
 Accloys the spirit! We may not be doomed
 To cope with Seraphs, but at least the rest
 Shall cope with us. Make no more giants, God,
 But elevate the race at once!

...

See if we cannot beat thine angels yet!

(I, 770-784)

Shelley's "muttering of angels" is here openly declared as Paracelsus's aim, and Smart's "wild talk" is an example of this, compared with Adamic language in "Parleying with Christopher Smart". The connection between Smart and Paracelsus is not haphazard: the idea of Adamic language which Browning attributes to Smart is discussed by Paracelsus in *De Natura Rerum* of 1537, among other works, in which Paracelsus claims that Adam knew the proper name for each thing¹⁶. Moreover, Paracelsus was one of the influences on Smart's "A Song to David". The "Song" is influenced by the Kabbala and by its diffusion in Renaissance magic, including Paracelsus's and Agrippa's works¹⁷. Aprile, who appears in the next part, might also be connected to Smart, and not just to Shelley's figure, for he makes claims which contain the germ of the mystic ideas conveyed by Smart in the "Song".

In "Paracelsus Attains" Aprile appears, speaking for all the frustrated poets who strove and failed. His aim is to love, yet like Shelley, the speaker of *Pauline* ⁴ ~~(and)~~ Paracelsus, he also wishes to attain supernatural language. The "muttering /Of angels" merges with Magic in his craving:

Could I retain one strain of all the psalm
Of the angels, one word of the fiat of God,

¹⁶ *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, ed. by Nicholas Goodrick (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990), p.189.

¹⁷ Marcus Walsh and Karina Williamson, *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p.153.

To let my followers know what such things are!

I would adventure nobly for their sakes:

...

Till, by a mighty moon, I tremblingly

Gathered these magic herbs, berry and bud,

In haste, not pausing to reject the weeds,

But happy plucking them at any price.

(II, 531-548)

Before he dies, Aprile experiences a revelation:

Yes; I see now. God is the perfect poet,

Who in his person acts his own creations.

Had you but told me this at first! Hush! Hush!

(II, 648-650)

Not many lines preceding this, Paracelsus tells us that the revelation of truth occurs oftenest at "death's approach", and indeed, Browning's own claims to truth are uttered by the dying Aprile and by the dying Paracelsus. Aprile's statement is attributed great importance by Browning: from 1835 until 1863, the words "PERFECT POET" appeared in capital letters in order to stress them, and indeed they are replete with meaning. First, they are an allusion to Smart's "Song to David". In the "Song", the seven pillars of the Lord are given seven Greek letters: each pillar stands for a day in the creation of the universe. Behind this is the idea that the creation of the universe is inherently

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linguistic, an idea derived from the Kabbala, according to which the world was created with the twenty-two Hebrew letters. Smart is also indebted to the notion of the Book of Nature, common in Western culture and literature, in which the universe is God's book.

This line also appertains to the historical Paracelsus himself: if Aprile wishes to obtain "God's fiat", and this linguistic act is the basis of all creation, then the poet himself wishes to be a god with creations as real as any object in the universe. Indeed, Paracelsus is known to have endeavoured to create human organisms in his laboratory, one in a long line of magicians who ventured to do the same¹⁸. This theme of creation includes resuscitation, as in Book I of *The Ring and the Book*, and conjuration, as in the opening of *Sordello* and in "Paracelsus Attains", for the setting for this section is "*Constantinople ; the house of a Greek Conjurer*". Browning bases this on Paracelsus's biography from the *Biographie Universelle* of 1822, which claims that Paracelsus travelled to Constantinople "for the purpose of obtaining the secret of the tincture of Trismegistus from a Greek who inhabited that capital"(142). Therefore, at this point Paracelsus is already into hermeticism although he only accepts it openly in Part IV. Those being conjured are the failed poets (lines 289-297), and Aprile himself, but these creations do not adore him as Shelley's "dim creations" do, they rather mock him. The image of the King/poet and his "troops of shadows" of *Pauline* recurs, but instead of

¹⁸ E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948). Canto Edition, p.82.

worshipping Paracelsus, Aprile says:

Ha,ha! our king that wouldst be, here at last?

(II, 340)

The 'kingship' motif also appears in the preface to the 1835 publication.

Browning may have decided to omit this preface in subsequent publications because it makes too obvious an association between himself and the speaker of *Pauline*, Aprile and Paracelsus.

It is certain, however, that a work like mine depends more immediately on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success – indeed were my scenes stars it must be his co-operating fancy, which, supplying all chasms, shall connect the scattered lights into one constellation – a Lyre or a Crown. I trust for his indulgence towards a poem which had not been imagined six months ago; and that even should he think slightly of the present (an experiment I am in no case likely to repeat) he will not be prejudiced against other productions which may follow in a more popular, and perhaps less difficult form (1030).

The preface reveals Browning's nervousness about the poem and lack of

confidence, and his grandiose Romantic aspirations, divulged in his use of Romantic connotations in the references to “fancy” and to the “Lyre”. The “Crown” refers us back to the first lines of *Pauline* where the speaker’s “brow burned/ Beneath the crown to which her [Nature] secrets knelt”. The references to the king and the crown emphasise the fine line between the crown as a metonymy for blasphemous and devilish ‘kingship’, and a metonymy for the great poet’s rightful position.

In Aprile’s statement, God, the perfect poet, “in his person acts his own creations”. In the original Yale Manuscript, the line is : “Who in His grand love acts his own conceptions”, and in the 1849 version in the Berg manuscript, it is changed to : “Who in creation acts his own conceptions”. Here we might trace the origin of the appeal of the form of the dramatic monologue to Browning.

God’s fiat is obviously superior and more powerful than magic spells and enchantments, but in his anger towards God who ⁴may take pleasure in confounding pride/ By hiding secrets with the scorned and base” he ultimately resorts to the “scorned and based” and takes his place with the magicians (II, 180-181).

In “Part III”, “Paracelsus”, we learn that Paracelsus’s attitude towards magic has indeed changed. The theme of resuscitation reappears, when Festus tells Paracelsus of the powers attributed to him:

Festus. When we may look to you as one ordained
 To free the flesh from fell disease, as frees
 Our Luther's burning tongue the fettered soul?
 When...

Paracelsus. When and where, the devil, did you get
 This notable news?

Festus. Even from the common voice;
 From those whose envy, daring not dispute
 The wonders it decries, attributes them
 To magic and such folly.

Paracelsus. Folly? Why not
 To magic, pray? You find a comfort, doubtless
 In holding, God ne'er troubles him about
 Us or our doings: once we were judged worth
 The devil's tempting...

(III, 342-353)

We are subtly informed of the end of his renunciation of magic when he is at
 his lowest in Book 4, and informs Festus of his new plans:

This is my plan - (first drinking its good luck)
 I will accept all helps; all I despised
 So rashly at the outset, equally
 With early impulses, late years have quenched:
 I have tried each way singly: now for both!

All helps! no one sort shall exclude the rest.

I seek to know and to enjoy at once,

Not one without the other as before.

(IV, 235-241)

He decides to turn to magic, but this time not for the good of humanity but for his own satisfaction and enjoyment. His resorting to magic is intermingled with the rejection of Christian morality. Unlike Paracelsus the historical figure who claimed to be a devout Christian as well as a magician, Browning cannot imagine that the two can coexist.

In the fifth part, "Paracelsus Attains", Paracelsus is on his deathbed, surrounded by imaginary "fiends", "Hell-spawn", laughing at his misery (129,134). In this hellish environment, a punishment for his sins, Paracelsus concocts a witch in one of his deathbed hallucinations:

Paracelsus. Oh, emptiness of fame!

Oh Persic Zoroaster, lord of stars!

- Who said these old ren~~o~~wns, dead long ago,

Could make me overlook the living world

To gaze through gloom at where they stood, indeed,

But stand no longer? What a warm light life

After the shade! In truth, my delicate witch,

My serpent-queen, you did but well to hide

The juggles I had else detected. Fire

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May well run harmless o'er a breast like yours!
 The cave was not so darkened by the smoke
 But that your white limbs dazzled me: oh, white,
 And panting as they twinkled, wildly dancing!
 I cared not for your passionate gestures then,
 But now I have forgotten the charm of charms,
 The foolish knowledge which I came to seek,
 While I remember that quaint dance; and thus
 I am come back, not for those mummeries,
 But to love you, and to kiss your little feet
 Soft as an ermine's winter coat!

(V, 186-205)

A few lines following the description of this seductive image, it fades from his imagination, and Paracelsus laments its disappearance: "sweet human love is gone!" (215). Paracelsus's point of view on the secrets of nature and the "charm of charms" has shifted. His final illumination will come from within, without the passionate craving for the acquisition of secrets, and the jealousy and paranoia that accompany it. The image of the beautiful witch, first appearing in *Pauline* and later reappearing in *Sordello* in the form of Adelaide, is here more sexually enticing than ever, reminding one of the sensuality of *Alastor*'s "veiled maid" (151). Thus magic becomes entangled with sex, and the scene of the magic ritual in Adelaide's chamber in *Sordello* contains the same sort of sensual quality. The blasphemous lack of inhibitions Browning

associates with magic in these poems, and the passion for forbidden power, becomes intertwined with sexual desire.

Paracelsus is driven by the urge to obtain the secrets of nature, embodied in magic language, to possess that most powerful language, and with it the power to control and to create like a god. Yet on his deathbed, he presents a totally different idea of language, no longer something occulted and forbidden like the secrets of nature that he had sought for so long.

Paracelsus, on the brink of death, has an illumination, as a consequence of which he exclaims: "I see all, I know all" (525-6). In his vision of the gradual progress of man towards a more perfect and divine creature, language is just another element in this process, and not a forbidden thing with all the power of the world contained within it.

... Oh long ago

The brow was twitched, the tremulous lids astir,
 The peaceful mouth disturbed; half uttered speech
 Ruffled the lip, and then the teeth were set,
 The breath drawn sharp, the strong right-hand clenched stronger,
 As it would pluck a lion by the jaw;
 The glorious creature laughed out even in sleep!
 (V, 756-762)

Paracelsus described the acquisition of language as gradual, natural, part of man's progress towards perfection and God. Paracelsus learns to accept the inadequacy of human speech, the "dim/ Struggles for truth", and not to crave for the power of the "Fiat of God":

...to sympathize, be proud
 Of their half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim
 Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
 Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts;
 (V, 876-879)

Thus, as in *The Ring and the Book*, Browning's final claim to truth maintains that absolute truth is, for the time being, unavailable. Paracelsus's and Browning's aims converge: Browning iterates his authoritative verity along with his magician.

Sordello

The references to magic and magic language in *Sordello* appear on two different levels. One level is the story of Sordello's development, and the other level constitutes the many digressions and metapoetic comments by the speaker/poet. The ideas on magic emerging from the work as a whole reflect the same equivocation which is to characterise Browning's attitude towards

magic in his career as a poet until the publication of the two parts of *Dramatic Idyls*, in 1879 and in 1880.

The speaker of *Sordello* is not only a narrator of *Sordello*'s story, but a philosophical poet who is both self-conscious and revealing as far as his poetic technique is concerned. In spite of the apparent renunciation of magic at the end of *Paracelsus*, in the opening lines of *Sordello*, the speaker/poet is once more a necromancer, like Paracelsus, conjuring an audience of dead poets:

... so, for once I face ye, friends,
 Summoned together from the world's four ends,
 Dropped down from Heaven or cast up from Hell,
 To hear the story I propose to tell.

...Here they are; now view
 The host I muster! Many a lighted face
 Foul with no vestige of the grave's disgrace;
 What else should tempt them back to taste our air
 Except to see how their successors fare?
 My audience: and they sit, each ghostly man
 Striving to look as living as he can,
 Brother by living brother; thou art set,
 Clear-witted critic, by...but I'll not fret
 A wondrous soul of them, nor move Death's spleen
 Who loves not to unlock them.

(I, 31-54)

The speaker of *Sordello* is the third in a series of magicians and necromancers, but this time, unambiguously equated with the poet. As in *Sordello* as a whole, the relation between magic and poetry is exposed and drawn out. The feeling of the power of the magician “mustering” the ghosts is mingled with a fear, an anxiety, that this exalted audience will not believe him and finally reject Browning, “the successor”. It is not quite clear who is in charge, the conjurer or the conjured. These opening lines contain many points of similarity with the comparison between the poet and the mage who raises “a ghost”, in *The Ring and the Book*¹⁹. In *The Ring and the Book* the emphasis is on the idea that the poet’s power to convey truths and to resuscitate the dead is imperfect and inferior to God’s power and creation, though trying to emulate it. Browning claims that the conjurer is not necessarily Faust, but could be seen as Elisha, a prophet serving God. The threat to the poet/magician in this passage is that of blasphemy, and the failure he fears is the telling of lies in the guise of truths. However, the opening lines of *Sordello* reveal the appeal of magic in terms of the relationship between the reader and the audience. In this earlier poem the conflict surrounding magic is twofold: first, it is one of the anxiety of influence, especially in relation to Shelley:

...Then, appear,

Verona! stay - thou, spirit, come not near

Now - not this time desert thy cloudy place

To scare me, thus employed, with that pure face!

¹⁹ Book I, lines 742-772.

I need not fear this audience, I make free
 With them, but then this is no place for thee!
 (I, 59-64)

As a magician, Browning manages to gain enough power to deny Shelley's influence, and to leave the confusion of *Pauline* behind him. Yet this denial is ironic, for Browning here becomes like Shelley, who is associated with magic and conjuration in Browning's mind. Browning is now a poet/magician in his own right, thus adopting Shelley's metaphor in order to feel strong enough to reject him.

The second concern in Browning's use of the metaphor of the poet as magician seems to be an anxiety over the possible rejection of the "audience" of dead poets, as well as contemporary critics and the reading public. The issue of the power of the speaker over his audience is a central one in Browning's work, and the magician's power over his audience is a subject Browning returns to in many of his poems²⁰. The feeling of magic power transmitted by the speaker in the first 77 lines of the poem is intermingled with an insistence on the powerful part played by the reader, who is reminded that it is up to him or her to decide whether to read the poem at all and whether to believe the speaker. Browning lets the reader know her own power, for he addresses the readers directly in line 17 asking them to play an active part in the poem by "leaving [them] to say the rest for him [Sordello]". Thus, as in

²⁰ "The Flight of the Duchess", "Mesmerism", "Transcendentalism", and "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"

other poems dealing with the same conflict, Browning's hidden wish for magic power over the audience is contradicted by his sincere call for an active reader who is the poet's equal.

Indeed, in most poems on magicians, Browning conveys a feeling of uneasiness over the magician's power over others and his hubris in relation to God. What is interesting in these opening lines of *Sordello* is that religious humility is completely irrelevant: the poet creates and conjures up, with no mention of guilt or shame. In these lines the poet is as a god who "in his person acts his own creations" (*Paracelsus* II 649):

...What heart

Have I to play my puppets, bear my part

Before these worthies?

(I, 71-3)

Browning attributes the same metaphor to God in the introduction of *Pippa Passes*:

Passes:

--God's puppets, best and worst,

Are we: there is no last nor first.

The speaker/poet, like a magician or a god, also controls time:

Lo, the Past is hurled

In twain: upthrust, out-staggering on the world,

Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears

Its outline, kindles at the core, appears

Verona.

(I, 73-7)

Browning once again refers to the poet's power in supernatural terms, yet as one goes on reading the poem, Browning's and the speaker's attitude towards magic and magicians becomes more complex. In spite of this initial metaphor of the poet as a conjuror, Browning reiterates an ostensible disillusionment with magic and all that it represents elsewhere in the poem. In the first lines of "Book the Second" he mockingly attributes images relating to magic to Eglamor:

The woods were long austere with snow: at last

Pink leaflets budded on the beech, and fast

Larches, scattered through pine-tree solitudes,

Brightened, "as in the slumbrous heart o' the woods

Our buried year, a witch, grew young again

To placid incantations, and that stain

About were from her cauldron, green smoke blent

With those black pines" - so Eglamor gave vent

To a chance fancy: whence a just rebuke

From his companion; brother Naddo shook

The solemnest of brows; Beware, he said,

‘Of setting up conceits in Nature’s stead!’

Forth wandered our Sordello.

(II, 1-13)

As in “Transcendentalism”²¹, Browning creates an artificial split between two of his poetic tendencies. The metaphor attributed to Eglamor is not unlike the “young witch” with “blue eyes” of *Pauline* (112) and the “delicate witch” of *Paracelsus* (Book V, 192), both of which are discussed earlier in this chapter. In *Pauline* as well as in *Paracelsus* the witch is an image out of the speakers’ morbid hallucinations: it is a strong attraction and an unchallenged metaphor, or “conceit”. Yet in *Sordello* Browning has already gained a distance from metaphors with “magic” vehicles. It is rather Eglamor who still employs such a metaphor with all seriousness, the same Eglamor who is “Sordello’s opposite” and “no genius rare”, and who dies following his humiliation in the contest with Sordello (196, 213). Yet the one who criticises this conceit is Naddo, whose views are taken even less seriously by the speaker than Eglamor’s. The speaker, and Browning himself, seem to transcend this ridiculous argument, yet it reappears in a more dramatic fashion in the passage on the “transcendental platan” in “Book the Third”. But prior to that, in “Book the Second”, another metaphor using a magician is employed, this time as a foil to Sordello. Sordello is now a successful poet in Mantua, but he feels he is losing his “prime design” because of the temptation of “single joys” (II, 554, 552).

²¹ See my discussion of the poem in chapter 3, “Browning and Magic”.

He laughed: what sage

But perishes if from his magic page

He look because, at the first line, a proof

'Twas heard salutes him from the cavern roof?

On! Give thyself, excluding aught beside,

To the day's task; compel thy slave provide

Its utmost at the soonest; turn the leaf

Thoroughly conned;

(II, 555-562)

The conjuror dies by his own spell, because he stopped the enchantment in order to check the initial response to it, instead of patiently waiting for its full effect to appear. Sordello, rather, wishes to be like the patient magician, who not only completes the enchantment, but also turns the page to more difficult ones. This image takes us back to Adelaide's and Palma's magic rite in the secret chamber, interrupted by Sordello, an image which is an essential one in Browning's construction of Sordello's character. Browning characterises the mage negatively, as one who surrenders to quick gratification, here as well as in "Book the Third", yet he chooses the power of the magician's spell as a metaphor for poetry. In the next few lines the reader finds out the frailty of language in general and poetic language in particular, and the magician's powerful spell becomes no more than a fantasy, compared with poetic language. Sordello reiterates Aprile's and the speaker of *Pauline*'s frustration with language. In his attempt to express poetic perception in language, he creates an "armour", the poem.

Piece after piece that armour broke away,
 Because perceptions whole, like that he sought
 To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought
 As language:
 (II, 588-591)

Sordello's failure and decision to give up poetry follows shortly afterwards, and so does the speaker/poet's crisis concerning *Sordello* itself. Sordello, like the magician killed by his own spell, fails, and Browning as the speaker/poet emerges from the crisis as the stronger and better poet.

In "Book the Third" the speaker refers to himself as a magician once again. The important passage on the "transcendental platan" occurs at a pivotal point in the poem, in which the speaker/poet is sharing with the readers a crisis in the writing process of the poem. Apparently, the crisis has an autobiographical basis, for in a letter to Fanny Haworth in May 1840 Browning reveals that he almost gave up on the poem in the middle of Book III. Yet, as Woolford and Karlin note, "this historical fact should be distinguished from the part which B.'s record of it plays in the poem itself: he makes his crisis of confidence crucial to the structure of the whole work"²². In the middle of the action, the speaker/poet digresses:

Nor slight too much my rhymes – "that spring, dispread,

²² Woolford and Karlin, *The Poems of Browning*, vol. 1, p.563.

Dispart, disperse, lingering overhead
 Like an escape of angels?" Rather say
 My transcendental platan! mounting gay
 (An archimage so courts a novice-queen)
 With tremulous silvered trunk, whence branches sheen
 Laugh out, thick foliaged next, a-shiver soon
 With coloured buds, then glowing like the moon
 One mild flame, last a pause, a burst, and all
 Her ivory limbs are smothered by a fall,
 Bloom-flinders and fruit-sparkles and leaf-dust,
 Ending the weird work prosecuted just
 For her amusement; he decrepit, stark,
 Dozes; her uncontrolled delight may mark
 Apart-

Yet not so, surely never so!

Only as good my soul were suffered go
 O'er the lagune: forth fare thee, put aside -
 Entrance thy synod, as a god may glide
 Out of the world he fills and leave it mute
 For myriad ages as we men compute,
 Returning into it without a break
 I' the consciousness! They sleep, and I awake
 O'er the lagune.

(III, 577-598)

Browning is exploring the metaphors of mage and god in relation to the poem, his creation. The first analogy, comparing him to a mage, is thoroughly rejected. Firstly, the quality of the created object is dubious. The trunk is “tremulous”, its flame “mild”, its duration short, and all this “weird work” is “prosecuted just for her amusement”. The attraction of this type of creation lies in the fact that its “coloured” and “glowing”, and especially in the “uncontrolled delight” of the audience, namely, the “novice queen”. The attraction of magic in relation to the poet’s fantasy of the enthrallment of an audience is brought up in the description of Sordello’s development as a poet as well. The relationship between the poet and the audience is one of power and courting and has a sexual tinge to it, “Her ivory limbs”, reminiscent of the witch’s “white limbs” in *Paracelsus*.

Yet this does not seem to be the approach to the poet/reader relations which Browning consciously adopts, for it does not depend “on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success”²³. The “transcendental platan” is like “the sudden rose” of ““Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books””²⁴: it is the poem as pure enchantment, enveloping the reader in an overwhelming experience, yet also having him or her “buried” in ““Transcendentalism””, and “smothered” in *Sordello*.

Isobel Armstrong sees the passage on the “transcendental platan” as a “metaphor for creation of pure mind”, and as a rejection of Romantic idealism,

²³ From the 1835 “Preface” to *Paracelsus, The Poems*, Vol. 1, p. 1029.

²⁴ See my discussion of the poem in chapter 3, “Browning and Magic”.

substituted by the “mundane lagune” which is “that concrete, substantive other, possessing the independent being of external things on which the self labours”²⁵. Thus the passage on the mage and his queen is one among the many expressions in *Sordello* of Browning’s “confident knowingness about the fallacies of Romantic accounts of creation” (145). Yet she does not mention that Browning’s rejection of this metaphor is suspiciously frequent, from his earliest *Pauline* to *The Ring and the Book*, and its attraction is twofold: it presents the poet’s complete control over the audience’s experience, and the creation of a complete and independent world using poetic language which functions as magic language.

The second metaphor is that of the poet as a god, and as in the opening lines, no sense of guilt or blasphemy is present. The poet/god puts his entire world to sleep, “Returning into it without a break/ O’ the consciousness!”. The poet here is a “god”, taken from the realm of Greek or Roman mythology, rather than the Judaeo-Christian “God”, thus making the metaphor playful rather than blasphemous. The idea of putting an entire world to sleep is taken from the realm of fairy tales and enchantments, and is related to magic rather than to God. In “Pietro of Abano”, for example, a similar play with time and consciousness is used by Pietro, the magician, who manipulates a young Greek’s consciousness, making him live an entire life with less than a second passing in the ‘real’ world. Thus, even though the “mage” metaphor is

²⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 147.

ostensibly rejected, it reemerges in these lines in a more subtle form.

Magic is brought up in Browning's digressions as a metaphor for poetic creation and a rejected relation between poet and audience, yet in *Sordello's* story Browning's approach to the subject is quite different. Even though many Browning poems deal with magic, *Sordello* is the only one that presents the role of magic as an essential part of the psychological account of the development of the poet. In this long poem Browning explains *why* magic is so important in the moulding of a poet's mind.

The figure associated with magic in *Sordello's* life is Adelaide, and *Sordello's* relation to her provides us with many clues about Browning's notion of the connection between magic and poetry. The forbidden northern chamber where Adelaide conducts her magic rituals constitutes a strong and appealing subject in *Sordello's* earliest poetic growth, and references to Adelaide's magic rites emerge in the three most important psychological changes in *Sordello's* development as a poet.

In *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* the quest for magic and magical language is rejected as unchristian and destructive. Yet its power is not seriously questioned: it is assumed to exist, yet must be resisted since the man who employs it defies God by wishing to become a God himself. In *Sordello* the conception of magic changes: the narrator and the mature *Sordello* are sceptical towards Adelaide's occult arts. Magic is rather a state of mind which is basic and crucial to the writing of poetry and which constitutes an essential

part of the poet's consciousness. Magic is also associated with the subjects the speaker/poet has brought up in his digressions, that is to Sordello's own craving for the adoration of an audience and for powerful poetry.

Adelaide, the main figure associated with magic in the poem, is the holder of secrets, which are a recurring subject in Browning's poetry. Both Paracelsus and the speaker of *Pauline* were in a quest for the secrets of nature, and in both poems the forbidden and destructive way to achieve their goal is by appealing to magic and exercising power through magic spells and charms. Adelaide holds the kind of hermetic secrets the reader was acquainted with in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, as well as the key to Sordello's birth, and thus the quest for universal truth merges with the personal quest in the most intimate fashion. In Sordello's childhood, Adelaide and her secret magical rites constitute an alluring forbidden realm of poetic inspiration. In "Book the First", Goito itself, Sordello's childhood "Paradise", is described as the "secret lodge of Adelaide", within which is hidden a greater secret, the northern side of the castle which is under a "mysterious interdict" (I. 627, 607, 615). The first description of the castle mentions Adelaide's northern chamber:

You gain the inmost chambers, gain at last
 A maple-panelled room: that haze which seems
 Floating about the panel, if there gleams
 A sunbeam over it will turn to gold
 And in light-graven characters unfold

The Arab's wisdom everywhere;

(I, 392-397)

The Arab's wisdom is the mystic lore Adelaide is interested in, and the mystic characters, probably containing charms and spells, are engraved into Goito itself, becoming an integral part of Sordello's mystic paradise. At this stage, the attitude towards Adelaide's occult arts is still one of respect and awe, like Sordello's approach to it as a child. The northern chamber comes up in three stages of the narrator's delineation of Sordello's stages of poetic development. In the first stage, where Sordello does not differentiate between nature and himself, "As if the poppy felt with him", he associates the blossoming "orpine patch" with the chief archer who ascended "with clinking step the northern stair/ Up to the solitary chambers where/ Sordello never came." (I, 705, 661-3). This poetic image shows that the forbidden chamber constitutes a strong and appealing subject in Sordello's earliest poetic associations. Moreover, Sordello's state of mind as a child in Goito has magical characteristics, from which Sordello's poetry ultimately stems.

So fed Sordello, not a shard disheathed;

As ever round each new discovery wreathed

Luxuriantly the fancies infantine

His admiration, bent on making fine

Its novel friend at any risk, would fling

In gay profusion forth: a ficklest king

Confessed these minions! Eager to dispense

So much from his own stock of thought and sense
 As might enable each to stand alone
 And serve him for a fellow; with his own
 Joining the qualities that just before
 Had graced some older favourite: so they wore
 A fluctuating halo, yesterday
 Set flicker and to-morrow filched away;
 Those upland objects each of separate name,
 Each with an aspect never twice the same,
 Waxing and waning as the new-born host
 Of fancies, like a single night's hoar-frost,
 Gave to familiar things a face grotesque;
 Only, preserving through the mad burlesque
 A grave regard: conceive; the orpine patch
 Blossoming earliest on our log-house-thatch
 The day those archers wound along the vines -
 Related to the Chief that left their lines
 To climb with clinking step the northern stair
 Up to the solitary chambers where
 Sordello never came.

(I, 637-663)

These lines describe the relationship between Sordello's mind and outer objects as one between a fickle king and his slaves: Sordello's imagination endows these objects with independent life, but also transforms them

incessantly. But this “mad burlesque” also has a “grave regard” having to do with an association regarding the prohibited northern chambers, and Sordello’s state of mind is shown to be not only playful but also mysterious²⁶. This state of consciousness in which there is not differentiation between the mind and external objects, and which is characterised by the mind’s ability to miraculously transform these objects, is the state of mind Freud terms childhood “omnipotence of thought”, and Piaget calls “animism”. Both Freud and Piaget term this kind of thought magical, for its similarity to the basic ideas of magic.

Since the child does not distinguish the psychical from the physical world, since in the early stages of his development he does not even recognise any definite limits between his self and the external world, it is to be expected that he will regard as living and conscious a large number of objects which are for us inert. This is the phenomenon we propose to study and we shall describe it by the current word “animism”²⁷.

Browning describes this state of mind, and implies that it is the source of Sordello’s poetic genius, rejecting Naddo’s theory that “genius” rather stems from “throes and stings”:

Or say a ruthless chance broke woof and warp –

²⁶ Woolford and Karlin, *The Poems of Browning*, p.439.

²⁷ Jean Piaget, *The Child’s Conception of the World*, p.169.

A heron's nest beat down by March winds sharp,
 A fawn breathless beneath the precipice,
 A bird with unsoiled breast and filmless eyes
 Warm in the brake - could these undo the trance
 Lapping Sordello? Not a circumstance
 That makes for you, friend Naddo! Eat fern-seed
 And peer beside us and report indeed
 If (your word) Genius dawned with throes and stings
 And the whole fiery catalogue, while springs,
 Summers and winters quietly came and went,
 Putting at length that period to content
 By right the world should have imposed: bereft
 Of its good offices, Sordello, left
 To study his companions, managed rip
 Their fringe off, learn the true relationship,
 Core with its crust, their natures with his own;
 Amid his wild-wood sights he lived alone:
 As if the poppy felt with him!
 (I, 687-705)

Sordello's "trance" emanates from his belief that he is alone in nature, and that external objects do not have an existence independently of his mind. Freud, likewise, believes that this state of mind is the source of the artistic

mind, and that art is the only field in which the childhood omnipotence of thought has been retained.²⁸

Thus, Adelaide's forbidden chamber is alluring to Sordello because it encapsulates all the power and mystery of Sordello's own thought processes: it seems to hold the ultimate secret of existence, the key to power and knowledge. The process of Sordello's maturation is accompanied by a demystification of the northern chamber, as he moves away from magical thought, and ultimately away from poetry as well.

Sordello's first encroachment on this forbidden world is mentioned in the second important psychological change in Sordello's development as a poet. When Sordello first feels he needs an audience, one of the images that he invokes is the following:

Whence contrive

A crowd, now? These women just alive,
 That archer-troop? Forth glided - not alone
 Each painted warrior, every girl of stone,
 - Nor Adelaide bent double o'er a scroll,
 One maiden at her knees, that eve his soul
 Shook as he stumbled through the arrased glooms
 On them, for, 'mid quaint robes and weird perfumes,
 Started the meagre Tuscan up (her eyes,

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p.148

The maiden's also, bluer with surprise)

- But the entire out-world:

(I, 747-757)

At the moment when his imagination expands to embrace independent human types as objects of poetry as well as an audience, the memory of the evening when his "soul/ Shook" entering the northern chamber springs up as one of these images which are now under the control of his imagination. Sordello's initial poetic characters are the archer-troop and Adelaide and Palma engrossed in a mystic ritual, and even though his stock of characters has at this point become unlimited, these early impressions remain a strong and recurring influence. The forbidden and the mystic are instigators in Sordello's first steps as a poet, and the moment in which the Northern chamber becomes a subject for poetry is the first step in Sordello's growing up, that is, gaining control over strong childhood impressions.

In "Book the Second" this important childhood experience of entering Adelaide's forbidden north chamber and finding her in the midst of an occult rite merges with the "luscious trance" which overwhelms him as he wins a prize and becomes Palma's minstrel.

But the people - but the cries,

The crowding round, and proffering the prize!

(For he had gained some prize) - He seemed to shrink

Into a sleepy cloud, just at whose brink

One sight withheld him; there sat Adelaide,
 Silent; but at her knees the very maid
 Of the North Chamber, her red lips as rich,
 The same pure fleecy hair; one curl of which,
 Golden and great, quite touched his cheek as o'er
 She leant, speaking some six words and no more;
 He answered something, anything; and she
 Unbound a scarf and laid it heavily
 Upon him, her neck's warmth and all; again
 Moved the arrested magic; in his brain
 Noises grew, and a light that turned to glare,
 And greater glare, until the intense flare
 Engulfed him, shut the whole scene from his sense,
 And when he woke 'twas many a furlong thence,
 At home: the sun shining his ruddy wont;
 The customary birds'-chirp; but his front
 Was crowned - was crowned! Her scented scarf around
 His neck!

(II, 93-114)

This passage is central to our understanding of Browning's idea of the relation between magic and poetry. The ceremony of the prize-giving is given the characteristics of a magic rite with two typical Browning ingredients: magic words ("six words and no more") and the presence of an enticing woman. The 'kingship' image of *Pauline* and *Paracelsus* that I discussed earlier, returns in

these lines, the audience adores Sordello like the “troop of shadows” in *Pauline*, and disappoints him as it does in *Paracelsus*. The “Crown” which Browning hopes for in the preface to *Paracelsus* is here bestowed on Sordello, but there is a price to be paid in terms of guilt towards Eglamor, Sordello’s predecessor, and Sordello’s own discontent with the audience.

In this merger of a magic rite with a prize-winning Browning reveals one of the major attractions of magic to him: the control over an audience. As in the lines on the “transcendental platan”, magic is attractive because of the power it helps the poet/mage gain over an audience. Nevertheless, as in the case of the “transcendental platan”, this kind of power is ultimately rejected. In the second book Sordello discovers the intoxication of being loved by an audience, and the danger of that intoxication. Once he realises that he is misunderstood, he decides to repudiate this praise from this “ungrateful audience” (640):

...Who were

The Mantuans, after all, that he should care

About their recognition, ay or no?

(II, 635-7)

...Wherefore then

Continue, make believe to find in men

A use he found not?

(II, 653-5)

The power he gained turns out to be empty of real meaning, just as the “transcendental platan” bursts and vanishes. Yet despite this rejection of magic as a metaphor for the relationship between the poet and his audience, another, deeper significance is attributed to magic and magic thought in the poet’s mind. The essential role magic plays in Sordello’s infantile state of mind is the basis of his becoming a poet, as I have tried to illustrate. The importance of this state of mind is reaffirmed in the speaker/poet’s digressive opening and closing of the poem, where he describes himself as a magician and conjuror. In spite of his apparent rejection, the speaker/poet is a magician conjuring an entire world and having absolute power over its inhabitants, as well as power over his audience’s consciousness, like the God in Book III, or the mesmerist:

...but, friends,

Wake up; the ghost’s gone, and the story ends.

(VI 869-870)

Robert Browning and Magic

Following *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, both of which contain magic as one of their central themes, Browning's references to magic in his middle years become more hidden and subtle. One prominent exception is "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", which is a blatant statement against contemporary magic, that is, spiritualism and other popular forms of nineteenth century magic. Browning finds these contemporary forms of magic abhorrent, and consequently, his admiration for medieval and renaissance magicians becomes less visible. What makes John of Halberdstat of "Transcendentalism" and "Pietro of Abano" wonderful, and D.D. Home abominable? To avoid this seeming contradiction, Browning does not dedicate major works to admirable magicians in the period until "Pietro of Abano" in 1880. In the meanwhile, Tennyson conjures up Merlin, characterizes him as a poet, and chooses him as a speaker in a personal poem published many years after *The Idylls of the King*. Browning's reply to Tennyson's Merlin in the *Idylls* is Pietro in his *Idyls*, and the contrast and comparison between these two magicians/poets will be discussed later on. Despite the fact that Browning does not dedicate entire works to admirable magicians in his middle period, the subject of magic remains central, appearing and reappearing in many of the poems of this period, as well as in the later period up until his death. I will discuss most of the poems that refer to magic after 1840 in this chapter.

Magic is used not merely as a subject but also as a technique. Browning employs some of the techniques of magic in his poetry: the idea of powerful magic language is

reflected in his use of Hebrew, spells and charms, and God's Word. Manipulation of time and space, characteristic of magic, is included in "Mesmerism", "Pietro of Abano", and "The Flight of the Duchess". Symbols as powerful magic tools in "Abt Vogler", and concealment as empowerment in "The Pied Piper", "The Flight of the Duchess", "Pietro of Abano", and "Fust and his Friends".

Robert Browning's attitude towards magic is best described as one of complexity and ambivalence. References to magic and magicians recur in his poetry, from his first published poem *Pauline* to his late "White Witchcraft", yet his magicians range from the detestable and deceiving Mr Sludge, to the venerable and marvelous John of Halberstadt in "Transcendentalism". His abnegation of magic is conspicuous in many of his poems, and derives from two sources: the first is a traditional Christian approach, and the second is a Victorian evolutionary stance which places magic at a primitive stage of cultural progress. Yet at a closer look, the many comparisons between magic and poetry which are drawn in his poetry, show that magic is closely connected to Browning's fantasy of powerful poetry which enchants the reader and "pour[s] heaven /Into this shut house of life" ("Transcendentalism" 45). My focus will be on magical language, namely, curses, charms, spells, and other linguistic acts that supposedly exert supernatural power over people and objects, and on the relevance of this notion of powerful language to Browning's ideas on poetic language.

In the poems that refer favourably to the occult, what draws Browning to magic is above all its language. The language of magic suggests to his mind a powerful poetic language that mediates between this world and a divine, spiritual one. Browning's

assumption about language is that it is inherently flawed, and therefore cannot ever fully express the divine ideas revealed to the mind of the poet. Many of Browning's poems express this predicament: Aprile laments the incompetence of 'fallen' human speech in *Paracelsus* (II 447-452), as does the speaker of *Pauline* (518-9) and *Sordello*. It has also been shown that Browning reiterates what he regards as the predicament of human language in his letters to Elizabeth Barrett¹. The form of the dramatic monologue also exhibits the limitations of the speakers whose understanding is compromised by their language, as in "An Epistle...of Karshish" where Karshish refers to Jesus as a magician and a leech, those being the only terms available in his vocabulary. Therefore, Browning found the notion of a language which connects the human with the divine alluring, and he refers to three such languages in his poetry: Hebrew, the Word, and the language of magic. The allure of the language of magic and "the fiat of God" (*Paracelsus* II 480) to the poet is a consequence of this inadequacy of human language: the conceptions underlying both these languages maintain that they have inherent supernatural power, that they present an unshakable tie between signified and signifier, and that words are forces which can create and have unmediated influence on the world. In his poetry, Browning reiterates the traditional assumption that the Word is essentially beyond human capacity and belongs to God who is for him "the PERFECT POET", whereas the language of magic seems more accessible in his poetry, and he uses it as a metaphor for powerful poetic language, in spite of the religious and rational objections to it found in his works and letters (*Paracelsus* ii 602).

¹ Karlin, *The Courtship*, p. 173-190

Nevertheless, Robert Browning's best known opinion on the subject of magic is his abhorrence of contemporary spiritualism, which caused a breach with Elizabeth Barrett. This narrow idea of Browning's attitude towards the occult is based upon what we know of the Brownings' relationship with the American medium D.D. Home and Robert Browning's poem "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'" which was probably based upon Home's character. Yet this is hardly Browning's only statement on the occult: references to magic and magicians pervade his poetry, from his first published poem *Pauline* to poems written in his old age. Browning had read Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* in an anthology of treatises on magic in his father's library, and used the introduction to the work as the motto for his first published poem, *Pauline*². For his second long poem he chose the subject of the life of Paracelsus, a sixteenth century physician and occultist who was interested in alchemy and hermetic writings. *Sordello* contains many references to the occult, as do the poems and plays of *Bells and Pomegranates*, *Men and Women*, *Dramatis Personae*, *the Ring and the Book*, and his late *Asolando* and *Dramatic Idyls*. What emerges from Browning's references to magic throughout his career is a complex attitude towards the occult characterised by an uneasy line between fascination with occult theories and magicians, and a rejection of spiritualism and superstitious thought. The appeal of the magician as a Romantic figure, a rebel and an outsider, remains intact in spite of a Christian rejection and a rational criticism. Magic offers a conception of language that could endow poetry with great power and the poet with great influence.

“The Pied Piper of Hamelin; A Child’s Story” contains the recurring figure of the

² Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, p.210.

magician within it, and being a fantasy and intended for children, the serious questions of the ethics of magic and its clash with religion, which troubled Browning in *Pauline*, and *Paracelsus*, are temporarily put aside. The piper/magician, with his ambiguous morality, is embraced and celebrated in all his strangeness. Ian Jack calls him “an ‘outsider’ with supernatural powers”, and David Goslee describes him as a subversive “unknowable” figure³. The pied piper is indeed characterised as an other:

‘Come in!’ – the Mayor cried, looking bigger:

And in did come the strangest figure!

His queer long coat from heel to head

Was half of yellow and half of red,

And he himself was tall and thin,

With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,

And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin,

No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,

But lips where smiles went out and in;

There was no guessing his kith and kin:

And nobody could enough admire

The tall man and his quaint attire.

(55-66)

³ Ian Jack, *Browning's Major Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 83. David Goslee, “Paying Browning’s Piper”, *SBHC* 16 (1988), 42-52 (p.43).

This strange figure of unknown race and origin, wearing a “gipsy coat”, is a universal traveller, he has piped his pipe in “Tartary” and “Asia”, and is on his way to “Bagdat”.

The piper is an Other with magic power:

... ‘Please your honours,’ said he, ‘I’m able,

By means of a secret charm, to draw

All creatures living beneath the sun,

That creep or swim or fly or run,

After me so as you never saw!

And I chiefly use my charm

On creatures that do people harm,

The mole, and toad, and newt, and viper;

And people call me the Pied Piper.’

(72-79)

The secret charm obviously takes us back to *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, yet unlike them, the pied piper is not subject to religious scruples. He remains an elusive figure with an autonomous scale of values, being fair and sincere on the one hand, and terribly cruel on the other. In the accounts of the legend which Browning had read before he wrote the poem, the piper’s identity is also a mystery, although in Wanley’s *Wonders of the Little World* the boys he lures away die and are never seen again, and in Verstegen’s

account in *Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities*, which is most similar to Browning's, but which Browning claimed he had not read, "negromancie" is mentioned, but the children survive⁴. Browning's father wrote a poem on the same legend, yet his piper, unlike his son's, is clearly evil and associated with the devil⁵.

Robert Browning's ambiguous characterization of his piper can be traced to Browning's ~~ambiguity~~ towards the myth of another mesmerising musician, Orpheus. *ambivalence*

In a letter to John Ruskin, written on December 10th, 1855, Browning states his disapproval of a relationship between poet and audience such as is suggested by the myth of Orpheus:

Do you think poetry was ever generally understood – or can be? Is the business of it to tell people what they know already, as they know it, and so precisely that they shall be able to cry out – 'Here you should supply *this* – *that*, you evidently pass over, and I'll help you from my own stock'? It is all teaching, on the contrary, and the people hate to be taught. They say otherwise, - make foolish fables about Orpheus enchanting stocks and stones, poets standing up and being worshipped, - all nonsense and impossible dreaming. A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward: look elsewhere, and you find misery enough.⁶

⁴ The accounts appear in the introduction to the poem in Woolford and Karlin's *The Poems of Browning* Vol.2, p.130-132. Also in DeVane's *A Browning Handbook*, p. 129-130.

⁵ *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), vol III, p.522-542.

⁶ W. G. Collingwood, *The Life and Work of John Ruskin*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1893), I, p.201.

Yet such an abhorred relationship recurs in his poetry. In “The Flight of the Duchess”, a similar relationship between the gypsy/poet and the duchess/reader is created. The theme of the reader, mesmerised by the poet’s “charm” appears in different clothing. The form of the poem is like the form Browning used in the *Dramatic Idyls* later on in his career: there is a narrator who mediates between the story and the reader and draws attention to the theme of story telling and to the relation between poet and reader. The simple minded speaker was chosen in order to leave much to the reader’s imagination, and the ironic gap between him and Browning serves to distance the author from the mystic statement. The same effect is achieved by a similar technique in “Mesmerism”, and by intending “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” for children. The ironic gap between Browning and his speaker is apparent in most of “The Flight of the Duchess” due to the many overstatements, and blunt and vulgar language, yet what is unquestionable in the story is the old gypsy’s charm. When the speaker describes the charm, the style changes, and the crude syntax and vulgar images disappear:

As her head thrown back showed the white throat curving;

And the very tresses shared in the pleasure,

Moving to the mystic measure,

Bounding as the bosom bounded.

I stopped short, more and more confounded,

And still her cheeks burned and eyes glistened,

As she listened and she listened:

When all at once a hand detained me,

The selfsame contagion gained me,
 And I kept time to the wondrous chime,
 Making out words and prose and rhyme,
 Till it seemed that the music furled
 Its wings like a task fulfilled, and dropped
 From under the words it first had propped,
 And left them midway in the world:
 Word took word as hand takes hand,
 I could hear at last, and understand,

(548-564)

In these lines the speaker describes the gypsy's charm while he falls under its spell, and thus the poem itself becomes 'bewitched' and takes on some of the charm's characteristics: the rhythm, rhyme and alliteration attempt to mesmerise the reader just like the gypsy is mesmerising the Duchess. The speaker's crude syntax and vulgar imagery disappear, and so does the ironic gap between speaker and author. The theme of domination using magic language is repeated, and as in "The Pied Piper" the ethical status of such domination is ambiguous, and in "Mesmerism" totally denounced. What exonerates the gypsy besides the fact that she is freeing the duchess from a much worse fate is her "Christian" message:

And thou shalt know, those arms once curled

About thee, what we knew before,
 How love is the only good in the world.
 Henceforth be loved as heart can love,
 Or brain devise, or hand approve!

(613-617)

Moreover, the gypsy has the ability to transcend, unlike the pied piper and the speaker of “Mesmerism” – her magic is not only instrumental, it is also symbolical, and she achieves supernatural language, or the the “gift of tongues”:

And then as, 'mid the dark, a gleam
 Of yet another morning breaks,
 And like the hand which ends a dream,
 Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
 Touches the flesh and the soul awakes,
 Then ---'
 Ay, then indeed something would happen!
 But what? For here her voice changed like a bird's;
 There grew more of the music and less of the words;
 Had Jacynth only been by me to clap pen
 To paper and put you down every syllable

With those clever clerky fingers,
 All I've forgotten as well as what lingers
 In this old brain of mine that's but ill able
 To give you even this poor version
 Of the speech I spoil, as it were, with stammering
 - More fault of those who had the hammering
 Of prosody into me and syntax,
 And did it, not with hobnails but tintacks!
 But to return from this excursion, -
 Just, do you mark, when the song was sweetest,
 The peace most deep and the charm completest,
 There came, shall I say, a snap -
 And the charm vanished!

(684-706)

The speaker tells of the inadequacy of his language, and his "stammering" emphasises Browning's theme of the contrast between human, earthly, and faulty language, and the gypsy's transcendent language which remains an unattainable dream⁷. The gypsy's language transcends the poem, like the music of the pied piper, Adamic language and the ineffable Name⁸.

⁷ See the discussion of Moses's stammer in chapter 4.

⁸ David L. Bergman claims that "No poem better illustrates the supernatural force of language than does 'The Flight of the Duchess.'" From "Word Magic in Browning's

Similarly, the experienced poet who criticizes tedious writing in "Transcendentalism" attempts to emulate the magician's rhymes which he presents as perfect poetry, and thus the poem itself again attempts to take on the properties of the magical language to which it refers. Yet in both cases the failure to achieve such magic language in poetry is embedded in the poem: in both poems there is a sense of the inherent inferiority of the written word to the powerful oral spell and an attempt to create an oral effect in writing. Moreover, the poems are ultimately inferior to the language of magic which creates roses and bewitches Duchesses: magic language symbolises an unreachable and perfect poetic language which only a select few, Browning believes, have mastered.

"Mesmerism" in *Men and Women* continues the exploration of powerful utterances for instrumental purposes. The pied piper's music and the gypsy's charm are replaced by Mesmerism⁹, a nineteenth century instance of magic introduced by Mesmer, who was influenced by Paracelsus's suggestion that the mysterious power of the magnet derives from the stars and is in all living things¹⁰. Mesmerism is part of the early 19th century's return to popular magic, and associated with Spiritualism, and this partly explains Browning's dislike of the phenomenon. Moreover, "Mesmerism" is about purely instrumental magic, with no redeeming spiritual quest for truth. The speaker is a villain, like Guido, or the Duke of "My Last Duchess", only he uses occult

'Flight of the Duchess"', *The Arnoldian: A Review of Mid Victorian Culture* 9:1 (1981), p.40.

⁹ See Daniel Karlin's "Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and 'Mesmerism'". *VP* 27:3-4 (1989), p.65-77.

¹⁰ See Richard Cavendish's *A History of Magic* (London: Sphere Books, 1977), p. 14.

knowledge. The poem appears after "An Epistle... of Karshish" and in it Christ's idea of love and the power of his language have undergone an ironic reversal: love becomes an obsession to control, and the power of language constitutes the speaker's "madhouse cell". Indeed, as in "Abt Vogler", there remains an ambiguity concerning the validity of the experience, which might simply be an illusion of a madman. The first stanza introduces us to a speaker who claims to be able to get whatever he wishes by a "strange" method:

All I believed is true!

I am able yet

All I want, to get

By a method as strange as new:

Dare I trust the same to you?

(1-5)

The speaker also demonstrates the same initial reluctance to divulge information about his newly found knowledge as Karshish does in the previous poem. The secretiveness involving the magic power is one of its essential characteristics. The next three stanzas create a mysterious, gothic atmosphere, the "wood-worm picks", the "death-watch ticks", "the house beams groan", and the spider, an emblem of occultism as in Karshish, "descends/Comes to find, God knows what friends!-". All of these characterize the speaker as a black magician, employing instrumental magic. The theme of creation and resuscitation associated with magic in *Paracelsus* and *The Ring*

and the Book reappears here, and its horrific implications associate the speaker with Frankenstein:

XX

While I – to the shape, I too

Feel my soul dilate

Nor a whit abate,

And relax not a gesture due,

As I see my belief come true.

XXI

For, there! have I drawn or no

Life to that lip?

Do my fingers dip

In a flame which again they throw

On the cheek that breaks a-glow?

(96-105)

In this poem the speaker knows his own villainy, and the last two stanzas are a prayer to God, asking to be restrained, and knowing that the price will one day be paid. In this the speaker differs from the gypsy and the pied piper. Even though all three manage to possess and dominate the audience/ reader/object of desire, this speaker is

the only one who mentions God and feelings of guilt and fear. Unlike the gypsy and the pied piper who are strangers and whose conflicts remain a mystery, this speaker experiences the traditional Western conflict of magic and religion we have seen in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*.

In his essay on “Mesmerism”, Daniel Karlin discusses the form of the poem as a reflection of the mesmeric act. The long sentence beginning in stanza 2 and ending in stanza 16, is an example of the speaker’s exertion of power over the reader, paralleling his occult control over his lover. The reader, like the woman in the poem, is silenced¹¹. Furthermore, Karlin claims that the discourse of power is elemental to the dramatic monologue. He quotes an early letter of Elizabeth Barrett’s in which she admires Browning’s “powers” as they are reflected in his “gestures of language & intonation”. Karlin continues from this point:

Some of these “gestures of language & intonation” bring Browning’s poetry close to the manifestation of power, the subjection of the will of one person to that of another, which EBB identified as characteristic of mesmerism. *Pauline*, for example, begins with an imperative: “Pauline, mine own, bend o’er me – thy soft breast / Shall pant to mine – bend o’er me.” So, too, does Browning’s next poem, *Paracelsus*: “Come close to me, dear friends; still closer; thus!” The characters who utter these lines are only the first in a long line of those who are determined to have their way, whose utterances are wilful and who attempt to impose their will on others. The dramatic monologue, in formal

¹¹ Karlin, “Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and ‘Mesmerism’”, p. 73.

terms, is ideally adapted to this process: it confers power on its protagonist, and he or she, in turn, is characteristically engaged in exercising power over a silent, or silenced, interlocutor. The Duke in “My last Duchess,” the bishop in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb,” Blougram in *Bishop Blougram’s Apology*, Andrea in “Andrea del Sarto,” the anonymous speakers in “An/ Wife to Any Husband” and “D’is Aliter Visum” – not to mention Guido, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the other speakers in *The Ring and the Book* – are some of the most obvious examples of such speakers. In these poems the exercise of power is directly evident both to the interlocutor and the reader. Browning’s preoccupation with power and the will, however, is inscribed in the very form of the dramatic monologue, irrespective of whether the speaker is engaged in an open, palpable display of power.¹²

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This discourse of power is interpreted in this thesis in terms of supernatural language, and how Browning uses it in order to exert power over the readers. “The Pied Piper”, “The Flight of the Duchess” and “Mesmerism” all reflect the tension between poet and readers in their contents. These three poems expose an anxiety over a frail self. This weak self belongs to the children of Hamelin, the duchess, and the young woman in “Mesmerism”. The self in these poems is almost too easily mesmerised, hypnotized, invaded, possessed. This weakness of the self is contrasted with the invading magic power attributed to an other. This other is the representation of the poet Browning castigates, yet who returns to haunt his poetry. This other remains an ambiguous personality, his morality vague, his motivation unclear. He represents the poet who

¹² Karlin, “Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, and ‘Mesmerism’”, p.70-71.

craves control and the adoration of an audience, the poet whose powerful self permeates weaker selves.

The poem in *Men and Women* which is most clearly concerned with magical language and its relation to poetry is "Transcendentalism". In the 1855 edition it is situated towards the end of *Men and Women*, with just one poem separating it from "One Word More", probably because both poems deal with poetical issues which pertain to the whole sequence of Men and Women¹³. Yet "Transcendentalism" is unlike "One Word More" in that Browning chooses to make an implied rather than an outright identification between the speaker and himself. The speaker is an experienced poet who is neither named nor anchored in a specific time or place, and the poem provides no clues that would suggest to the reader an ironical gap between the speaker and the author¹⁴. In "Transcendentalism", Browning creates tension between two poets and their texts: the speaker addresses a young poet in a didactic and overbearing tone, and the young poet's work, which is regarded by the speaker as inferior, is appropriated.

¹³ In *Poetical Works* (1863), Browning placed it first among the twelve poems that constituted the revised form of *Men and Women*.

¹⁴ Indeed, most critics tend to interpret the poem as Browning's own statement. See DeVane, *Handbook*, p.275, in which he suggests that the poem is a reply to Carlyle's statement that poets should formulate their message in prose. Herbert Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p.188-9, Roma A. King, "Browning: 'Mage' and 'Maker'" in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Philip Drew (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 189, and Philip Drew, *The Poetry of Browning* (London: Methuen, 1970) p.45. Ian Jack in *Browning's Major Poetry*, p. 195, makes the opposite claim: the young poet who is not prepared to sing is Browning himself, and the speaker is criticised for putting popularity first. This reading cannot account for the similarities between Browning's own statements about his poetry and the speaker's. More plausible interpretations are presented in Drew's *The Poetry of Browning*, and by Richard D. Altick, "Browning's 'Transcendentalism'", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58 (1959), pp. 24-29.

All that remains of this imaginary 'absent' text is its title, which is put in quotation marks and becomes the title of "'Transcendentalism'".

The 'absent' poem is an example of poor, ineffectual poetry, which like Boehme's "tough book" has no clear meaning, but rather depends on our reading, "the sense most to our mind" (32). Unlike the first intertextual comment of the poem which is on this imaginary 'inferior' text, the second is an allusion to a real text written by Boehme and probably read by Browning in the spring of 1853¹⁵. The speaker's attitude toward this text is similarly aggressive: he terms it a "tough book" which the reader toils on, only in order to "find life's summer past" (30-33). Yet one of the more striking images of "'Transcendentalism'", that of the speaking flowers, is inspired by Boehme's writings:

As German Boehme never cared for plants
 Until it happed, a-walking in the fields,
 He noticed all at once that plants could speak,
 Nay, turned with loosened tongue to talk with him.
 That day the daisy had an eye indeed -
 Colloquized with the cowslip on such themes!
 (22-27)

¹⁵ DeVane, *Handbook*, p.273.

Boehme believed that nature is the language of God, and that each living, temporal thing, represents a power in the eternal world:

So that when I see a herb standing, I may say with truth: This is an image of the Earth-spirit, in which the upper powers rejoice, and regard it as their child; for the earth spirit is but one being with the upper, outward powers¹⁶.

Browning thus tries to "improve" upon Boehme's prose, turning it into the kind of powerful poetry which is draped "in sights and sounds" (4). Therefore, the speaker employs an aggressive tone towards the two 'inferior' texts to which he refers, while "Transcendentalism" itself attempts to be that powerful poetry which the speaker contrasts with these 'inferior' texts. The poem attempts to emulate what the speaker presents as powerful and effective poetry, poetry for which he uses magic as a metaphor. Poetry should be like a spell used in a magical feat, a "brace of rhymes" uttered by "some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt" (37)

He with a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,

And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,

Over us, under, round us every side,

Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs

¹⁶ Jacob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, p.198. From the treatise "Theosopia".

And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all, -

Buries us with a glory, young once more,

Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

(39-45)

In *Men and Women* Browning hoped to achieve such powerful and unequivocal poetry, which he believed would gain him critical acclaim and broad popularity¹⁷. The "musty volumes" represent Browning's anxiety over the production of 'weak' poetry, as well as a criticism of texts written by other authors. These lines portray the poet's fantasy, embodied in the magician's powerful rhymes, and his nightmare, that his works will be buried under a magician's spell among other "musty volumes". Philip Drew convincingly argues that the young poet and the speaker coincide with the subjective and the objective poet in Browning's "Essay on Shelley" written in 1852. Accordingly, in this poem Browning asserts his desire to write poetry which creates: like the rose, Browning's men and women are the constructs of the objective poet's attempt to make poetry as powerful as spells or the Word. Yet the poem shows an awareness that this attempt is doomed to fail. Firstly, these lines speak of the superior power of the spoken word to the written one: Boehme's book, along with other "musty volumes", becomes just another dead object when contrasted with the magician's utterances. Indeed, Browning must have known that in most occult theories magic spells need to be uttered to awaken their latent power - written they are powerless. In 1853, two years before the publication of *Men and Women*,

¹⁷ Clyde de L. Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.110.

Browning wrote his friend Joseph Milsand: "I am writing - a first step towards popularity for me - lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see..."¹⁸. Thus, by choosing the form of the dramatic monologue, Browning was, among other things, hoping to endow his poetry with those oral qualities admired in the mage's speech in "Transcendentalism".

The reference to Boehme in "Transcendentalism" holds another clue to Browning's attraction to magical theories of language. Browning had probably read Boehme in 1853 when Elizabeth Barrett Browning and he were reading Swedenborg¹⁹. Boehme was a seventeenth century shoemaker and occult philosopher heavily influenced by Paracelsus and Agrippa. Although the fantasy of language which creates is contrasted in "Transcendentalism" with Jacob Boehme's "tough book", Browning does not disagree with Boehme's ideas on language but rather with his style, for Boehme, like Browning's magician, believed he found the tie between word and thing. The theory of magic behind spells such as the one in "Transcendentalism" maintains that knowing the occult name of a thing, which is part of its essence, gives one power over it. Likewise, Boehme drew on Paracelsus's idea that every natural object manifests a sign which reveals the object's occult properties. Boehme described a mystical experience in which natural objects suddenly reveal their supernatural essence and thus prove the existence of God within nature. This idea of the 'speech of nature' is equated by Boehme with the Kabbalistic idea of Adamic language according to which in the Garden of Eden Adam named the objects around him with names corresponding

¹⁸ Pettigrew, *The Poems*, Vol 1, p. 1145.

¹⁹ DeVane, *Handbook*, p. 273.

to their true essence, and that this sacred tongue was lost forever after the disaster of Babel. Browning depicts Boehme's epiphany in "'Transcendentalism'":

...Objects throng our youth, 't is true;
 We see and hear and do not wonder much:
 If you could tell us what they mean, indeed!
 As German Boehme never cared for plants
 Until it happed, a-walking in the fields,
 He noticed all at once that plants could speak,
 Nay, turned with loosened tongue to talk with him.
 That day the daisy had an eye indeed -
 Colloquized with the cowslip on such themes!
 We find them extant yet in Jacob's prose.

z/

(19-28)

Etymologically, the word 'daisy' derives from 'Day's eye', and Browning alludes to this in an attempt to illustrate Boehme's notion that the essence of an object is stamped onto its name. As I have noted, Browning's criticism of Boehme's style does not imply a rejection of his theory of transcendent language, and this point is reemphasised in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart" of 1887. In this poem Browning, in his own persona, praises Smart for achieving what other poets could not achieve, namely, in Browning's words, "Pierc[ing] the screen/ 'Twixt thing and word" (113-4):

Was it that when, by rarest chance, there fell
 Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
 Naked, and whoso saw for once could tell
 Us others of her majesty and might
 In large, her loveliness infinite
 In little, - straight you used the power wherewith
 Sense, penetrating as ~~th~~ough rind to pith
 Each object, thoroughly revealed might view
 And comprehend the old things thus made new,
 So that while eye saw, soul to tongue could trust
 Thing which struck word out, and once more adjust
 Real vision to right language...
 ...each had its note and name
 For Man to know by, - Man who, now - the same
 As erst in Eden, needs that all he sees
 Be named him ere he note by what degrees
 Of strength and beauty to its end Design
 Ever thus operates...

(140-161)

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This epiphany which Browning attributes to Smart is virtually identical to Boehme's mystic experience, and reveals Browning's belief in a supernatural language only rarely revealed to a chosen few. This occult conception of transcendent language is regarded in "With Christopher Smart" as the perfect kind of poetry, and is contrasted with the imperfection of 'fallen' human language, the poet's usual tool.

The language of "Transcendentalism" is inherently inferior to the supernatural language it wishes to emulate. The speaker wishes to be like "John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about"; he wishes the language of poetry to be like the kind of language which claims to have power to create, i.e. spells and the Logos, in comparison with which poetic language is traditionally considered as inferior (38). Moreover, even in this poem which conveys a positive perception of magic the effect of the magic rhymes is as aggressive as it is enchanting:

And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
 Over us, under, round us every side,
 Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
 And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all, -
 Buries us with a glory, young once more,
 Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

(40-45)

The rose engulfs and "buries" the reader as well as the other, "inferior" texts, thus suggesting two kinds of conflict: one between the poet and the reader, and the other between this text and other texts to which it claims to be superior. The relation to the reader is ambivalent: although the rhymes rejuvenate the reader, the fact that he or she ~~are~~ "buried" implies that the relationship, like that between a magician and the person he enchants, is one based on power. In this context, line 45, according to which the magician/poet brings the divine into the human realm, accentuates the superiority of the poet, who actively "pours" heaven into "this shut house of life", thus dominating the interaction between the two²⁰. Yet this is clearly a fantasy, contrasted with the final stanza, where the speaker returns to the initial situation in which he confronted his fellow poet. Here, the young poet is not the powerful intermediate between heaven and humanity, but rather

is /

Bent, following the cherub at the top

That points to God with his paired half-moon wings.

(50-51)

The active "pouring" is superseded by the more passive "following", and heaven is no longer susceptible to "a brace of rhymes" as it was in the preceding stanza. Thus, in this stanza, poetry occupies a more humble and realistic place than it did in the fantasy of the poet as a powerful magician. Poetic language, within the limits of 'frail' human

passage /

²⁰ In a letter to Ruskin in 1855, Browning claims that all poetry is "putting the infinite within the finite" (Collingwood, p.200). This statement helps corroborate the comparison between the speaker of "Transcendentalism" and Browning.

language, can no longer willfully create, it can now merely try to transcend.

This stanza remains aggressive as far as the young poet addressed is concerned.

Having usurped the poet's "Poem in Twelve Books", and appropriating it by placing it in quotation marks and making it the title of the 'superior' poem, the speaker now humiliates the poet by making him an object for the speaker's own poetic endeavor:

You are a poem, though your poem's naught.

The best of all you showed before, believe,

Was your own boy-face o'er the finer chords

Bent,

(47-49)

The young poet is now reduced to being an image in the speaker's poem, after his own poem has been annulled. In spite of the speaker's aggression towards the young poet and Boehme, there seems to be sufficient ground to claim that these examples of failure stand for Browning's anxiety about the effect of his own poetry, especially his early poems²¹. Boehme's "tough book" is accused of obscurity: the speaker claims that it has no clear meaning, but rather depends on our reading, "the sense most to our mind" (32). Thus, according to the speaker, an ambiguous text that depends on the

²¹ Altick (1959) claims that in "Transcendentalism", "Browning is addressing himself, or, more specifically, the poet that he has been down to the age of forty", and that the poem is "a veiled expression of his decision to mend his poetic ways" (25,28).

reader's interpretation is an unsuccessful one. By the time he wrote this poem, Browning had already been accused of lack of clarity, especially as far as *Sordello* was concerned²². He intended *Men and Women* to be more accessible, and therefore believed that it would prove more popular²³. Thus, the meaning of this assertion about the failure of obscure texts is twofold: it is an aggressive intertextual comment with regard to Boehme's text and the young poet's 'missing' text, and it expresses Browning's anxiety over his unsuccessful poetry and his decision to make *Men and Women* the best work he had ever produced.

Thus, this poem exhibits two main themes which I will be focusing on in this essay: Browning's longing for powerful poetry, like the magician's "brace of rhymes", and his attempt at the appropriation of traditionally powerful kinds of language, such as magic spells and the Word, in order to write poetry which has the power to create and to reach the divine. "Transcendentalism" presents Browning's fear that his poems, written in 'inadequate' human language, will have no powerful effect on his audience. In his craving for what he calls in "One Word More" "the tongue's imperial fiat", the metaphor of the poet as magician emerges as one which would grant his own poem that power which he longs for it to have. Magical language in this fantasy has the positive function of being the poet's tool for the mediation between the divine and the human. Like Aprile's "magic herbs", the magician's rhymes embody the poet's hope of "putting the infinite within the finite". Yet this attractive romantic connection between

²² DeVane, *Handbook*, p.86.

²³ Ryals, *The Life*, 110.

poetry and magic, probably influenced by Coleridge and Shelley²⁴, is not uncritically received by Browning, since it clearly remains part of a fantasy which cannot be realised. Yet the poem presents an essentially positive view of magical language which is contrasted in other poems with an evolutionary and Christian awareness which places magic in a less admirable position than that given to it by the Romantics. Whereas in "Transcendentalism" we have seen magical language as embodying a fantasy to create powerful poetry capable of transcendence, in "An Epistle", among other poems, magical language is lowly and primitive, an unchristian and failing attempt to touch the divine.

We know from Browning's letters that he was extremely sceptical of the contemporary popularity of mesmerism and spiritualism in England. Yet testimonies of mesmerism left a great impression on Elizabeth Barrett, and by 1852 table-turning, rapping spirits, and clairvoyance were frequently discussed in the Browning household in Florence²⁵. The noticeable difference between Robert Browning's and Elizabeth Barrett's attitudes towards spiritualism was that she could not resist the force of personal testimony, whereas he was basically a skeptic who was aware that these testimonies could be reduced to either fraud or self-delusion. The disagreement between them on the subject of spiritualism was exacerbated following their acquaintance with D. D. Home, a famous American medium. Browning's initial skepticism changed into outrage after the Brownings took part in one of Home's

²⁴ Anya Taylor discusses the centrality of magic in the poetry and thought of Shelley and Coleridge in *Magic and English Romanticism*.

²⁵ Katherine H. Porter, *Through a Glass Darkly: Spiritualism in the Browning Circle* (Lawrence: University of Kansas press, 1958), p. 40.

seances in Ealing in 1855. In letters to friends he describes the seance, stating that he found "the whole performance most clumsy, and unworthy anybody really setting up for a 'medium'"²⁶. Following Browning's claim that the seance was "a cheat and imposture" and the publication of "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", Home declared that Robert Browning was actually quite convinced during and after the seance and that his anger stemmed from the fact that one of the spirits invoked placed a wreath on Elizabeth Barrett's head rather than on his own²⁷. Browning was obviously incensed by this suggestion, and his hatred of Home grew. Nine years after the seance and three years after his wife's death, "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" appeared in *Dramatis Personae*, and was received with much public interest and critical response. The speaker in the poem is Mr. Sludge, an American medium who is caught cheating in the middle of a seance, and fully confesses before his client, but only to reaffirm the truth of spiritualism by claiming that "all was not cheating", and that there was a "germ of truth" in all his lies (ll. 1311, 1325). This claim is once more undermined by the ending of the poem, where Sludge congratulates himself on having managed to fool his listener²⁸. Browning's attack on spiritualism is twofold: it is an attack on the people who practice it, the exploitative mediums and the credulous clients, as well as

²⁶ Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds*, p. 52.

²⁷ Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds*, p. 59.

²⁸ Critics have responded to the poem in essentially two ways. Some saw it as an outright rejection of spiritualism and the occult theories presented by the speaker (Drew, *The Poetry of Browning*, p. 143-8, Lyon William Phelps, "Robert Browning on Spiritualism" *Yale Review* 23 (1933), 125-128). Others saw it as a repudiation of the speaker rather than of the occult theories he propounds (Thomas E. Fish, "Browning and Mr. Sludge: The Vista and the Impasse of Character" *SBHC* 11 (1983), 61-76.) G. K. Chesterton, in *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1906), goes as far as to say that the poem is a justification of spiritualism (p. 191). Isobel Armstrong, in "Browning's *Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'*", in Drew (1966) claims that in the poem Browning questions his own beliefs and assumptions, especially his belief in the poetic imagination and transcendental insight (p. 221).

on the logically weak theories behind spiritualism. Sludge's following argument illustrates both points:

I live by signs and omens: looked at the roof
 Where the pigeons settle – ‘If the further bird,
 The white, takes wing first, I’ll confess when thrashed;
 Not, if the blue does’ - so I said to myself
 Last week, lest you should take me by surprise:
 Off flapped the white, - and I’m confessing, sir!
 Perhaps ’tis Providence’s whim and way
 With only me, i’ the world: how can you tell?

(971-978)

Like Browning's Caliban, Sludge refers to himself in the third person and seems to believe that every natural occurrence around him is related to him. His idea of a universe in which God makes arbitrary decisions based on trivial facts resembles Caliban's idea of God:

’Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
 Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;
 ’Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
 And two worms he whose nippers end in red;

As it likes me each time, I do: so He.

(104-108)

Browning's idea of evolution partly coincides with the popular Victorian interpretation of the theory according to which evolution is progress towards a prescribed goal as part of a divine scheme²⁹. Browning places this kind of superstitious thought characteristic of magic, combined with the idea of an amoral God, at a primitive pre-Christian stage in human evolution, in "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'", "Caliban Upon Setebos", and "An Epistle...of Karshish the Arab Physician".

Nevertheless, "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'" is not a repudiation of the supernatural, in which Browning ultimately did believe in his own way, rather it exhibits his resentment of spiritualism's degradation and trivialisation of the supernatural. In a letter to Ruskin Browning writes that poetry is "putting the infinite within the finite" - and Sludge and other mediums who pretend to do the same thing are degrading and corrupting this cause. Indeed, most of Browning's magicians are not quacks but rather, like the poet, take this task of mediating between the infinite and the finite seriously, and are characterised with Browning's utmost sympathy. "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" gives us an inkling of Browning's knowledge of Renaissance magic, Christian Hermeticism, alchemy, and kabbala. These subjects recur in Browning's

²⁹For a detailed discussion of Browning's notion of evolution and progress see Georg Roppen, *Evolution and Poetic Belief in Oslo Studies in English 5* (Oslo and Oxford: Oslo University Press & Basil Blackwell, 1956), ch.2.

poetry, before and after the writing of "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", and not with repugnance but rather with a qualified fascination.

In "Natural Magic" and "Magical Nature" of *Pacchiarotto and how He Worked in Distemper*, Browning returns to the subject of magic, using it as a metaphor for love. In the first poem appears a "swarth little lady" or a "Nautch" (Indian dancing girl) which the speaker locks up, only to find out when he draws the bolt, that she is "embowered/With – who knows what verdure". The first stanza thus deals with a magic feat which seems impossible, and that the spectator wouldn't have believed if he hadn't seen it himself. In the second stanza this turns out to be a metaphor for love, which brought life into a blank and dull life. The magic feat in the first stanza is a perfect example of the kind of degraded magic of Spiritualism as we have seen in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", yet here Browning admits to being willingly duped, as he believed his wife was many years before. This giving up of logic in favor of an emotional experience is a kind of apology to Elizabeth Barrett. Magic in these two poems is not the magic of Pietro or Paracelsus, it is natural rather than supernatural magic, harmless and benevolent, the same kind of magic appearing in the 1889 "White Witchcraft" of *Asolando : Fancies and Facts*. In this poem, social magic as power over the other reappears, but as a game or a metaphor, and termed "white", that is, magic not associated with the devil. Canidia, a sorceress who uses magic potions in order to increase Horace's love for her in *Epodes V and XVII*, turns her lover into a toad thus condemning him to a life of unrequited love for her. The tone is playful, and magic is used as a metaphor for love: yet the more sinister implications of social magic we saw in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" and "Mesmerism" are certainly touched upon even here.

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“Pietro of Abano” was published in *Dramatic Idyls: Second Series* in 1880, and presents a favourable portrait of a magician whose story Browning knew from the *Biographie Universelle* and admired for decades. In a letter to Elizabeth Barrett of 8 Feb. 1846, Browning mentions Pietro of Abano and translates a quatrain attributed to him:

Poor dear wonderful persecuted Pietro d’Abano wrote this quatrain on the people’s plaguing him about his mathematical studies and wanting to burn him - he helped to build Padua Cathedral, wrote a Treatise on Magic still extant, and passes for a conjurer in his country to this day - when there is a storm the mothers tell the children that he is in the air; his pact with the evil one obliged him to drink no *milk*, no natural human food! You know Tieck’s novel about him? Well, this quatrain is said, I believe truly, to have been discovered in a well near Padua some fifty years ago.

Studiando le mie cifre, col compasso

Rilevo, che presto sarò sotterra -

Perchè del mio saper si fa gran chiasso,

E gl’ignoranti m’hanno mosso guerra.

Affecting, is it not, in its simple child like plaining? Now so, if I remember, I turned it - word for word -

Studying my cyphers, with the compass

I reckon - who soon shall be below ground,

Because of my lore they make great “rumpus,”

And against me war makes each dull rogue round.³⁰

Browning’s fascination with this figure persisted, and 34 years later, “Pietro of Abano” was published. The poem is spoken by a narrator, as are the other idyls, and the tone is very sympathetic towards Pietro. The poem begins with the exclamation “*Petrus Aponensis* – there was a magician!”, yet the speaker goes on to make a distinction between a mere magician such as Pietro, and “[one] who, on pretence of serving man, serves duly/ Man’s arch foe”, Satan (lines 1, 31-2).

Browning constructs the image of a “white” magician, one who undoubtedly has magic powers, but is mistakenly catalogued as an enemy of Christianity. Later on in the poem, Peter is compared to Hans of Halberstadt, the wonderful poet/mage of “Transcendentalism”. Thus, in the poem, Browning’s idea of the magic is freed from the Christian stigma of Satanism, and Browning revels in the power of magic as he does in “Transcendentalism” and even goes further than he does in 1855. The first stanza of “Pietro of Abano” associates Pietro with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Paracelsus, and Sludge:

Petrus Aponensis – there was a magician!

When that strange adventure happened, which I mean to tell my hearers,

³⁰ Kelley and Lewis, *The Brownings’ Correspondence* (1994), XII, p.48. 8 February, 1846.

Nearly had he tried all trades – beside physician,

Architect, astronomer, astrologer, - or worse:

How else, as the old books warrant, was he able,

All at once, through all the world, to prove the promptest of appearers

Where was prince to cure, tower to build as high as Babel,

Star to name or sky-sign read, - yet pouch, for pains, a curse?

(1-8)

The story is presented as an old legend and in an amused tone, compared, for example, with “A Death in the Desert”, in which there is more insistence on the apparent truth-value of the text. Like the pied piper, Pietro miraculously appears where he is needed, he reads signs and is a man of all trades like Sludge, and he resembles Paracelsus in his mingling of medicine and magic, and in being persecuted.

The reference to the tower of Babel in the first stanza is a hint that Pietro is a rebel who strives for divine power, and especially for the mastery of supernatural language, as we shall later see. His ear is “unused to aught save angels’ tongues”, that is, he has managed to transcend human speech and be acquainted with divine language. This ambition for supernatural power does not condemn him in the eyes of the narrator, who goes on to characterize him as a prophet:

Country yelled ‘Aroint the churl who prophesies we take no pleasance

Under vine and fig-tree, since the year's delirious,

Bears no crop of any kind, - all through the planet Mars!'

...

Peter grinned and bore it, such disgraceful usage:

Somehow, cuffs and kicks and curses seem ordained his like to suffer:

Prophet's pay with Christians, now as in the Jew's ^Uage,

N

Still is – stoning: . . .

(22-36)

Peter is described by the Greek as the “Lord of magic lore” and as one “who possess the secret”, the secret that Paracelsus longs for. Peter's acquisition of this secret is not debated in this poem, what is discussed is the enslavement of “weaker” others in the fashion of “Mesmerism”, “The Flight of the Duchess”, and “The Pied Piper”. The Greek wishes to learn Peter's secrets in order to control others:

(;)

Teach me such true magic – now and no adjournment!

Teach your art of making fools subserve the man of mind!

Magic is the power we men of mind should practise,

Draw fools to become our drudges, docile henceforth, never dreaming -

While they do our hests for fancied gain – the fact is

What they toil and moil to get proves falsehood: truth's behind!

(91-96)

The Greek tries to persuade Pietro in four different ways/ He begins by mentioning that he was born in Greece where “the soul grows godlike”, and presenting himself as a swan “in search of knowledge – food for song”, and his ambition as “purest of ambitions!”. Next he presents his social ambition, to improve the state of humanity: “Geese will soon grow swans, and men become what I am now!”. His next attempt is through flattery: “You it was and only you.../Ruled the world in fact”. His last try is his most successful one, his promise of love, for which milk is used as a metaphor:

0/

Love, the milk that sweetens his meal – alas, you lack:

I am he who, since he fears you not, can love you.

(148-149)

It is the magician’s need for love and compassion that appealed to Browning to begin with, as we see in the letter to Elizabeth Barrett in 1846. Thus, Pietro decides to test the Greek’s character using magic, and this feat is obtained by a most interesting technique. As in “Jochanan Hakkadosh” the poem touches upon the subject of alternate lives, using supernatural manipulation of time. The Greek experiences twenty-one years of life in a fraction of a second: the intermission between “bene-~~x~~ and “-dicite” in Pietro’s blessing.

4

At the word of promise thus implied, our stranger –

What can he but cast his arms, in rapture of embrace, round Peter?

'Hold! I choke!' the mage grunts. 'Shall I in the manger

Any longer play the dog? Approach, my calf, and feed!

Bene... won't you wait for grace?' But sudden incense

Wool-white, serpent-solid, curled up – perfume growing sweet and

sweeter

Till it reached the young man's nose and seemed to win sense

Soul and all from out his brain through nostril: yes, indeed!

(169-176)

In the twenty-one years until the final "dicite" is uttered, the Greek obtains riches, political power, and finally, religious power, thanks to Pietro's spells. When he becomes Pope Pietro turns to him for help for the third and last time, but this time, asking him to save his book rather than his life:

Peter faltered – coughing first by way of prologue -

'Holiness, your help comes late: a death at ninety little matters/

o/h

Padua, build poor Peter's pyre now, on log roll log,

Burn away – I've lived my day! Yet here's the sting in death –

I've an author's pride: I want my book's survival:

u.c.

See, I've hid it in my breast to warm me 'mid the rags and tatters!

Save it – tell next age your Master had no rival!

Scholar's debt discharged in full, be "Thanks" my latest breath!

'Faugh, the frowsy bundle – scribblings harum-scarum

Scattered o'er a dozen sheepskins! What's the name of this farrago?

Ha – "*Conciliator Differentiarum*" –

Man and book may burn together, cause the world no loss!

Stop – what else? A tractate – eh, "*De Speciebus*

Ceremonialis Ma-gi-ae?" I dream sure! Hence, away, go,

Wizard, - quick avoid me! Vain you clasp my knee, buss

Hand that bears the Fisher's ring or foot that boasts the cross!

u.c.

'Help! The old magician clings like an octopus!

Ah, you rise now – fuming, fretting, frowning, if I read your features!

Frown, who cares? We're Pope, once Pope, you can't unpop us!

Good – you muster up a smile : that's better! Still so brisk?

All at once grown youthful? But the case is plain! Ass –

Here I dally with the fiend, yet know the Word – compels all creatures

Earthly, heavenly, hellish. *Apaga, Sathanas!*

Dicum verbum Salomonis - ' - *dicite!*' When – whisk! -

(385-408)

Once “dicite” is uttered, the Greek wakes up from under the spell and returns to the time of the beginning of the poem, and the twenty-one years turn out to be an illusion. Like the gypsy of “The Flight of the Duchess”, Pietro’s spells are potent, and just like her, he “All at once grow[s] youthful”, or in other words, has power over age and time. Like the gypsy and John of Halberdstat, Pietro is a positive magician, who grants freedom and knowledge to others. Nevertheless there is a new theme here: the last stanzas of “Pietro of Abano” epitomize the change in Browning’s approach to magic and magicians. Whereas in *Pauline* Browning presents magic as ruinous and evil, and contrasts it with Christian humility and love, in “Pietro of Abano” the Christian is the immoral side, and the magician is embraced as the humble and moral hero. The Latin phrases, supposed to be as powerful as the Word, and derived from King Solomon, and the Christian ultimate power in face of Satan, or the devil, is here questioned. The traditionally powerful Christian phrases are denied all power – and become completely ineffectual under the magician’s spell. Browning no longer takes the traditional dichotomy of magic and Christianity for granted, his own beliefs have now outgrown this Christian common belief, and he even dares to turn it up side down.

Browning’s identification with Pietro, obvious from the letter to Elizabeth Barrett, reappears in the poem. Pietro is characterized as an author, and the most important thing for him is the survival of his work. He cares deeply for it, and it even serves to warm him up physically, placed under his garments. This touching characterization of Pietro as one that searches for truth and is needlessly victimized by society does not contradict his being a magician, and neither does Browning bother to deny Pietro’s association with the devil. In the poem, Browning refers to the legend of Pietro’s

abhorrence of milk because of his pact with the devil, but he uses milk as a metaphor for love³¹. Browning certainly endows Pietro with supernatural power: his spells certainly work, as the case of the Greek shows, but he also presents him as a gifted physician and scientist (lines 12, 43-6). Browning chooses to leave the question of Pietro's association with the devil open, yet this does not hinder the sympathetic characterization of Pietro in the poem.

The last two stanzas of the poem are very revealing, since Browning meant them to be understood as his own personal statement. The narrator is the same sympathetic one speaking in the beginning of the poem:

Peter lived his life out, menaced yet no martyr,
 Knew himself the mighty man he was – such knowledge all his guerdon,
 Left the world a big book – people but in part err
 When they style a true *Scientiae Com-pen-di-um*:
 'Admirationem incutit' they sourly
 Smile, as fast they shut the folio which myself was somehow spurred on
 Once to ope: but love – life's milk which daily, hourly,
 Blockheads lap – O Peter, still thy taste of love's to come!

³¹ Browning must have heard this legend and others about Pietro of Abano when he was in northern Italy in 1838, and have been reminded of it forty years later, when he re-visited northern Italy in 1878 and 1879; he also consulted one of his most frequently used sources, the *Biographie Universelle* (DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, p.453-4).

Greek, was your ambition likewise doomed to failure?

True, I find no record you wore purple, walked with axe and fasces,

Played some antipope's part: still, friend, don't turn tail, you're

Certain, with but these two gifts, to gain earth's prize in time!

Cleverness uncurbed by conscience – if you ransacked

Peter's book you'd find no potent spell like these to rule the masses;

Nor should want example, had I not to transact

a/

Other business. Go your ways, you'll thrive! So ends my rhyme.

(417- 32)

Browning is referring to his own acquaintance with Pietro's book, *Conciliator differentiarum quae inter philosophos et medicos versantur*. The book discusses medicine, astrology, and magic. It derides some forms of magic, terming them superstitious, but treats other forms seriously. Invocations of God are referred to as an excellent means of acquiring knowledge, and this tradition partly derives from the use of the ineffable name in Jewish mysticism, to which a later chapter of my thesis is devoted. Pietro associates different stars with spirits, and the spirit associated with Venus is Anael, a name Browning uses for Djabal's beautiful lover in *The Return of the Druses*. Browning was obviously acquainted with the book, and although he does not show admiration for it in these closing stanzas, the survival of the "big book" is a kind of victory that Browning as speaker seems to share.

In addition, in the closing stanzas, the speaker addresses both Pietro and the Greek, judges them, and foretells their futures. The speaker's admiration of Pietro's book is only partial, he claims "people but in part err" when they call it "a true *Scientiae Compendium*", and seems half ashamed when he admits that he "was somehow spurred on/ Once to ope" that same book. Nevertheless his admiration for the man's intellect and character is unambiguous.

...but love – life's milk which daily, hourly,

Blockheads lap – O Peter, still thy taste of love's to come!

(423-424)

Thus Browning completely vindicates Pietro from the accusation of being a Satanic agent, and promises him divine love. In the last stanza the speaker addresses the Greek, and seems to take on Peter's role, as if he were the one accosted by the Greek:

Cleverness uncurbed by conscience – if you ransacked

Peter's book you'd find no such potent spell to rule the masses;

Nor should want example, had I not to transact

Other business. Go your ways, you'll thrive! So ends my rhyme.

(429-432)

The speaker's admiration and identification with Pietro is here apparent, and the speaker is implying that Pietro consciously omitted the powerful spell from his book because of the danger it withholds. Nevertheless, Pietro does use the spell himself, on the Greek. This exact power over the other is the power which Browning himself wants to exert over his readers, as we have seen in the other poems on magic, "Transcendentalism", "Mesmerism", Book I of *The Ring and the Book*, and others. Indeed, in the poem Browning uses a poetic technique which parallels Pietro's spell: the reader, like the Greek himself, is under the illusion created by this manipulation of time, only to be disabused at the end of the poem. Once again, poet and magician mingle, and Browning evinces attraction as well as rejection towards the manipulation of an other. The epilogue to the poem terms the poem a "legend" which is "sung" or "lilted", but strangely enough it mentions the Roman Caesar Tiberius, known for his cruelty and perversity, who throws golden dice at the fountain of Padua, and receives the highest possible score. Browning brings up this image of corrupted power, to compare it with himself, whose dice do not show "venus" (the highest throw of the dice). Thus, Browning ends the poem with an apology, distancing himself from such figures of power such as Pietro, the Greek, and Tiberius.

The poem also serves as a foil to Tennyson's Merlin in the *Idylls of the King*.

Tennyson's interest in Merlin is manifested in "Merlin and Vivien" of the *Idylls of the King* that was first published in 1859, and rewritten in 1873 and 1875. Tennyson's identification with Merlin is even more apparent in "Merlin and the Gleam" published in 1889, a poem that Christopher Ricks called a "mystical autobiography"³². Merlin,

³² Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1972), p.297.

like Browning's magicians (except for Sludge, who is not a true magician but an impostor), is a poet, an artist, employing magic language, and writing magic narratives. In accordance with the Western tradition of the magus, they are in search of some hidden truth, embodied in secret charms and hermetic texts. Both poets vindicate "their" magicians from dealings with the devil, thus characterizing them as mystical and powerful yet benign. Nevertheless, even though both are attracted to the figure of the medieval magician and bard, their choices of a historical or a mythical figure and their characterization of these figures are very different. Firstly, Tennyson chose the mythical and stately figure, associated with kingship and with authority, whereas Browning's favourite magicians are subversive figures, neglected and abused, such as Paracelsus, the piper, and Pietro. This contrast parallels the differences in the poets' social status: Tennyson is Wordsworth's natural heir to the title of Poet Laureate, unlike Browning, as Daniel Karlin comments:

But there never was much prospect of a middle-class dissenting poet like Browning, born and educated in London, becoming Poet Laureate, let alone Wordsworth's spiritual son and heir. That role had been bagged by the genteel, Anglican, country-born, Cambridge-educated Tennyson³³.

Tennyson's style and subject matter were more palatable to the Victorian public than Browning's, and so is Tennyson's Merlin. It is not unlikely that Browning had Merlin of the *Idylls* in mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, when he wrote "Pietro of

³³ Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds*, p. 38.

Abano” of the *Idyls*. Browning’s introduction of Pietro is achieved in terms reminiscent of Tennyson’s description of Merlin’s occupation:

And after that, she set herself to gain
 Him, the most famous man of all those times,
 Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,
 Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls,
 Was also Bard, and knew the starry heavens;
 The people called him Wizard;
 (163-168)

The obvious difference being that Merlin is rewarded and admired for his knowledge, whereas Pietro is persecuted and unacknowledged. Furthermore, both poems discuss the attempt of an ambitious youth to attain a powerful charm from the older magician for selfish reasons. Both try to tempt the experienced magician with love: Vivien lures him with the promise of sexual love, and the Greek promises love and fidelity. The outcome is different in the two poems: Tennyson’s Merlin is weaker than Pietro, gives in, and dies as a consequence. Most of “Merlin and Vivien” is original, though very loosely based on Malory. In fact, Tennyson turns the love story up side down. In Malory, Merlin “felle in dotage” on Nenyve:

And allwayes he lay aboute to have hir maydynhode, and she was ever
 passynge wery of hym and wolde have bene delyverde of hym, for she was

aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son, and she cowde not be skyfte of
hym by no meane³⁴.

In “Merlin and Vivien” Merlin is indifferent to Vivien, although she ultimately does manage to seduce him, but with great difficulty. Tennyson adds dignity and wisdom to Malory’s Merlin (as well as a bit of male chauvinism):

For men at most differ as Heaven and earth,
But women, worst and best, as Heaven and Hell.
I know the Table Round, my friends of old;
All brave, and many generous, and some chaste.
She cloaks the scar of some repulse with lies;
I well believe she tempted them and fail’d,
Being so bitter: for fine plots may fail,
Tho’ harlots paint their talk as well as face
With colours of the heart that are not theirs.
(812-820)

Browning, on the other hand, revels in Pietro’s misfortunes, which are an integral part of his positive characterization. He is attracted to the figure precisely because it is

³⁴ Thomas Malory, *Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), “*The Tale of King Arthur*” part IV, p. 77.

unappreciated and persecuted, as the letter to Elizabeth Barrett reveals. Pietro belongs to a different type of magician from Merlin: he practices his own original magic whereas Merlin's magic is described as traditional and unenterprising. The charm of "woven paces and of waving hands" which Merlin possesses belongs to another.

"Thou read the book, my pretty Vivien!

O ay, it is but twenty pages long,

But every page having an ample marge,

And every marge enclosing in the midst

A square of text that looks a little blot,

The text no larger than the limbs of fleas;

And every square of text an awful charm,

Writ in a language that has long gone by.

So long that mountains have arisen since

With cities on their flanks – thou read the book!

And every margin scribbled, crost, and cramm'd

With comment, densest condensation, hard

To mind and eye; but the long sleepless nights

Of my long life had made it easy to me.

And none can read the text, not even I;

And none can read the comment but myself;

And in the comment did I find the charm.

(665-681)

Merlin's magic art is the product of tedious years of studying. The original text is beyond his understanding, it is rather the comment on the text that contains the charm, and the process of attaining it seems as dull as the research done by Browning's grammarian:

Grant I have mastered learning's crabbed text,

Still there's the comment.

Let me know all! Prate not of most or least,

Painful or easy!

(59-62)

In his description of Merlin's acquisition of magic charms, Tennyson draws on the tradition of the meticulous study of language, and as Donald Hair comments, "Merlin is like the modern philologist struggling with these languages and trying to make sense of the relations among them"³⁵. Tennyson focuses on the power of written texts, granting the speaker hardly any intrinsic magic power:

³⁵ Donald Hair, *Tennyson's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p.161.

O, the results are simple; a mere child

Might use it to the harm of anyone,

And never could undo it:

(682-684)

Pietro's use of magic is very different: the charms seem to be his own, his book is an original work, and the charm, "benedicite", is an everyday phrase that is rendered magical only by the magician's powerful utterance³⁶. These differences reflect the poets' styles, with Browning's emphasis on powerful utterances embodied in the form of the dramatic monologue, and Tennyson's more traditional and elegant poetic language. Tennyson identifies with Merlin, who has earned royal and national recognition and admiration, and is afraid of being "lost to life and use and name and fame", whereas Browning identifies with Pietro, the powerful and subversive magician who is neither acknowledged nor renowned³⁷.

The next poem is a Jewish legend, which continues the theme of supernatural power, but this time, the power of Satan. Evil and Death themselves are embodied in this laden figure, and the unashamed use of power is contrasted with Pietro's

³⁶ The source of this emphasis is found in Pietro's *Conciliator Differentiarum* itself, for he believes that incantations have no inherent power, and that it is rather the virtue of the speaker, and the assistance of the spirits to that chosen speaker, which grant the incantation its power. From Lynn Thorndike's *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), II, p.903.

³⁷ Tennyson's identification with Merlin becomes fully apparent in "Merlin and the Gleam" published in 1889, in which the speaker is the dying Merlin who advises a young mariner to follow his example and "follow the Gleam".

cautiousness.³⁸ Once again, magic is discussed in the form of a legend so as to avoid a serious discussion of its validity. In the *Parleyings*, the epilogue “Fust and his Friends” is presented differently: it begins with a historical pointer, “Mayence, 1457”, and the story is partly based on historical facts. Accordingly, the poem does not contain any justification or acknowledgment of magic or magicians, it is rather a deconstruction of the historical “role” of the magician. The poem reveals a great deal about Browning’s late attitudes on the history of magic. The poem presents Fust, the inventor of the press according to some sources, but his figure is confused with that of Faust the magician who made a pact with the devil. Yet just like Pietro, Fust is not a devilish magician but an inventor and thirsty for knowledge. Throughout the poem Fust is completely vindicated, ~~however~~ the society which terms anything unknown “black magic” is criticized and derided. Magic is presented as an invention, completely devoid of power, but as in *The Return of the Druses*, it has a social purpose in terms of power and manipulation. The seven friends who represent the authorities and the church use the hatred of so called magicians in order to annihilate an original and subversive figure such as Fust. Fust, like Pietro is an ingenious man as well as a creator, and the only thing he shares with the traditional figure of the magician is the conflict of autonomous creation versus fear of God which we find in so many of Browning’s works, *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *The Ring and the Book*, just to name an obvious few.

whereas

Thus, in spite of Browning's rejection of spiritualism and of superstitious magic

³⁸ As in “Jochanan Hakkadosh”, the poem illustrates that truth may sometimes lie in falsehood, “have our elders erred/In thinking there’s some water there, not all mud?” (lines 258-9).

thought for rational and religious reasons, he shows a fascination with magicians and sympathy for them. The language of magic has an especially strong appeal to him in terms of its poetic inspiration, the quest for absolute knowledge, and the endeavour to mediate between the divine and the human. The power that the magician has over his audiences is alluring as well as abhorrent: Browning returns to the subject of the manipulation of the other in spite of his disgust for it. His ambivalence towards magic does not influence his embrace of occult theories of language which have infiltrated Christian thought and derive from sources such as kabbala, Paracelsus, Agrippa, and Boehme, though he is well aware of their origin. As a whole, though magic in Browning's works is frequently presented as ludicrous and superstitious, it is quite clear that in many ways it still has Browning under its spell. He debunks the social definition of magic and its uses, yet he returns to the metaphor as if there is something in magic after all.

“A proper speech were this מלאכה”: Browning and the Hebrew Language

Browning’s interest in the Hebrew language and in Jewish lore has its origin in his early home environment: both his mother and his father introduced him to the subject of Hebrew language and culture, a field which would interest him into his old age. Robert Browning senior knew Hebrew, among five other foreign languages, and showed a keen interest in Talmud¹. He knew Hebrew well enough to compile an annotated Nomenclature of the Hebrew Bible which Robert Browning thought highly of. In his autobiography, Moncure D. Conway reveals that Robert Browning senior was “particularly instructive in folklore”, and that his mind “was a storehouse of literary and philosophical antiquities. He seemed to have known Paracelsus, Faustus, and even Talmudic personages personally”². Browning's mother used to read him bible stories from his infancy, a habit which he mentioned in a letter to a Jewish friend, Emily Harris:

I am glad to hear of the progress of the Bible stories, most beautiful they are, as you say, and I have every reason to know - who was taught them, from the very beginning of my life almost, by my mother; I hear her voice now repeating the Joseph and his Brethren, David and Goliath, the contest of Elijah with the Priests of Baal; all and every available one indeed. There is nothing

¹Berlin-Lieberman, Judith. *Robert Browning and Hebraism* (Jerusalem: Azriel Press, 1934), p.9.

²Moncure Daniel Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences*, 2 vols (London: Cassell & Co., 1904), II, p.21.

comparable to them in the whole literature of the world; nothing I continue to love more³.

The *Biographie Universelle*, which he had been reading from his youth onward and was one of his principal sources of information and inspiration, contains numerous entries on Jewish Rabbis and mystics. What might have triggered Browning's sympathy for the Jews and for Jewish culture, apart from his parents' love of that culture, is a horrific description of a pogrom in one of Browning's best loved childhood books, Nathaniel Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World*⁴. Apart from Browning's many references to Jewish culture in his poetry, Browning wrote two poems the main subject of which is the abhorrence of the persecution of the Jews. The first is "Holy-Cross Day" in *Men and Women*, which bears a certain resemblance to Wanley's story of the 1604 pogrom, and the second poem is "Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial". Both poems manifest knowledge of Jewish culture, and indeed, we learn from Browning's letters that between 1837-1840 he read Rabbinic lore, though he eventually "let it slip"⁵. On November 23rd, 1845 he writes to Elizabeth Barrett:

[S]ome four or five years ago, when I could read what I only guess at now, - thro' my idle opening the hand and letting the caught bird go - but there used

³ Berlin-Lieberman, p. 9.

⁴ Nathaniel Wanley, *Wonders of the Little World; or, A General History of Man* (London: T. Davies, 1774), p.350-351.

⁵ Berlin-Lieberman, p.10.

to be a real satisfaction to me in writing those grand Hebrew characters - the noble language!⁶

Elizabeth Barrett knew Hebrew quite well: she studied the Bible in Hebrew and two of her books, John Pankhurst's *An Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1778) and *Biblia Hebraica sine punctis* by M. Forster, contain a large number of notes. The Brownings' library included many books in and on Hebrew, including two books on Hebrew grammar purchased in 1883 when Robert Browning's interest in Hebrew was renewed⁷. The use of Hebrew and the many references to the Talmud and the Kabbala in his poetry reveal a special regard for the Hebrew language and Jewish culture which manifests itself in his work from the time of the publication of the poems of *Men and Women* in 1855, and seems to strengthen in Browning's late publications, especially in *Jocoseria* and *Ferishtah's Fancies*. The inclusion of Hebrew phrases in some of these late poems, in *Jochanan Hakkadosh* for example, demonstrates this reawakened interest. Alfred Domett includes the following account in his diary:

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One fancies Browning laughing in his sleeve, occasionally in this book at the surprise of his readers as he taunts their ignorance with quotations in the original Hebrew, flung in their faces without a word of explanation, preface or apology. He turns his Rabbinical reading to account in *Jochanan Hakkadosh*... This of Browning and Hebrew reminds me that many years ago,

⁶ Kelley and Lewis, *The Brownings' Correspondence* (1993), XI, p.196.

⁷Kelley and Coley, *The Browning Collections*, p. 20, 26, and Berlin-Lieberman, p. 11-12. Browning's purchase of books on Hebrew in 1883 is mentioned in *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas FitzGerald 1876-1889*, ed. by Edward McAleer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966),p. 162.

somewhere between 1835 and 1840, he told me one day he had begun learning that language and was reading the first chapter of Genesis, remarking upon the fine effect of the words in the original of 'God said, let there be light - and there was light'; how the two parts of the verb in the Hebrew, each a single word, sounded - the last like the immediate echo and repercussion as it were, of the first, like two claps of the hand, one quick upon the other, without the slightest pause or interval between them; illustrating beautifully the sudden swift obedience and unhesitating compliance of Nature with the divine command⁸.

e/ -

Browning was attracted not only to the Hebrew language but also to the Jewish people. Browning had several Jewish friends: the Rothschilds helped his father obtain a position in the Bank of England, and Browning himself maintained a friendship with the family throughout his life⁹. He also made friends with the Philipson family in Florence, and the Solomon brothers, especially Simeon, the Pre-Raphaelite painter, and both these friendships are mentioned in the correspondence with Isabella Blagden. Browning writes to her in February 1869:

Yes, I saw the Solomons,- you know, I naturally like artists
- also Jews: so that both artist and Jew is irresistible.¹⁰

⁸ Alfred Domett, *The Diary of Alfred Domett 1872-1885*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 249.

⁹ Berlin-Lieberman, p.13.

¹⁰ Edward McAleer, *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p.313.

It is unknown whether he discussed Jewish lore or the Hebrew language with these friends, but it is quite clear that his friendship with Emily Harris included intellectual discussions on Jewish matters. In the introduction to the correspondence between Browning and Mrs. Thomas FitzGerald, Edward McAleer writes:

Emily Harris, whom he met through Mrs. FitzGerald, never forgot how the poet, with tears in his eyes, spoke with infinite reverence in the lowest tone, his feeling for the mysterious Ruach [spirit], that animates the very core, and the essence of Judaism¹¹.

This interest in Judaism is the source of the myth of Browning's Jewish blood, a myth of unknown origin, which was debunked by Furnivall in the *Browning Society's Papers* in 1891¹². Mrs. Orr suggests that the reasons for the emergence of the myth were Browning's "Jewish appearance and knowledge of Hebrew and sympathy with the Jews"¹³. John Woolford remarks that Mrs. Orr's and Frederick Furnivall's attempts to refute the theory were marked with "a comic, or perhaps a sinister eagerness"¹⁴. M.D. Conway, another contemporary of Browning's, adds what he thinks is a vital piece of information, namely that Robert Browning Senior did not, in his view, have a Jewish appearance, and that the theory of Browning's Jewish origin was made more plausible by the fact that Browning had been a clerk for the Rothschild family, and by his "Hebrew learning"¹⁵. G.K. Chesterton's view on the

¹¹ McAleer, *Learned Lady*, p.23.

¹² *Browning Society Papers*, (1890-1891), vol. III, part I.

¹³ Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, revised by Frederick G. Kenyon (London: Smith, Elder, 1908), p.1.

¹⁴ Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p.157

¹⁵ Conway, *Autobiography*, vol. II, p.21.

issue is amusing and instructive. In his *Robert Browning* of 1903, he mentions three specious theories on Browning's ancestry: that his family was "prominent in the feudal ages", that he had "a strain of the negro", and that he was of Jewish origin.

Then, again, there is a theory that he was of Jewish blood; a view which is perfectly conceivable, and which Browning would have been the last to have thought derogatory, but for which, as a matter of fact, there is exceedingly little evidence. The chief reason assigned by his contemporaries for the belief was the fact that he was, without doubt, specially and profoundly interested in Jewish matters. This suggestion, worthless in any case, would, if anything, tell the other way. For while an Englishman may be enthusiastic about England, or indignant against England, it never occurred to any living Englishman to be interested in England. Browning was, like every other intelligent Aryan, interested in the Jews; but if he was related to every people in which he was interested, he must have been of extraordinary mixed extraction¹⁶.

George Orwell observed that the only Victorian writers who supported the Jews were George Eliot and Dickens, but his observation was wrong: Browning's defense of the Jews and appreciation of their culture was outstandingly clear and consistent¹⁷. It is undoubtedly the strangeness of Browning's interest in Judaism in the eyes of the Victorians that gave birth to the myth of Browning's Jewish origin.

Browning's references to Hebrew are laden with intertextuality, considering the

¹⁶ Chesterton, G.K., *Robert Browning*, (London: Macmillan, 1917), p.4.

¹⁷ Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning*, p.157.

special status of Hebrew in Christian culture. Hebrew was considered, by Augustine as well as by nearly all the early fathers, the primordial language, the language spoken before Babel. In his *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Umberto Eco traces the development of the Western idea of the perfect language, and consequently devotes much of his book to ideas on Hebrew, the language traditionally believed to be divine and perfect. He contends that in spite of the church Fathers' belief in the primordial nature of Hebrew, the knowledge of Hebrew had been lost, and the interest in Hebrew in Christian culture was revived only from the Renaissance onwards¹⁸. This revival was heavily influenced by the Kabbala, the product of a current of Hebrew mysticism which flowered in the Jewish milieu of Provence and Spain in the thirteenth century. The Kabbala attributed mystic powers to Hebrew letters and words, with special focus on the divine force of the names of God. These ideas had a profound effect on European ideas about language, and manifest themselves in fields such as Renaissance magic and Puritan theories of language which Browning might have known from his parents' library. Browning was acquainted with both the Kabbala and some of the works that it influenced. Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*, the introduction to which Browning used in *Pauline*, claims that Hebrew is "the most sacred in the figures of characters...consisting in matter, form, and spirit"¹⁹. Agrippa reiterates the Kabbalistic idea that the twenty two Hebrew letters are the foundation of the whole of creation, and that every creature and object receives "their name, being and virtue" from these letters²⁰. In Browning's *Paracelsus*, Aprile's last words to Paracelsus about God being the perfect poet may draw on the kabbalistic idea of

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. By James Fentress (Oxford U.K. and Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), p.25.

¹⁹ Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy or Magic*, p. 216.

²⁰ Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy or Magic*, p.218.

creation mentioned in Agrippa, since Browning certainly would have read Agrippa by the time he wrote *Paracelsus* in 1835:

Yes; I see now. God is the perfect poet,
 Who in his person acts his own creations.
 Had you but told me this at first! Hush! Hush!
 (II, 648-650)

Agrippa also mentions Hebrew in relation to the practice of magic:

Hebrew letters are the most efficacious of all, because they have the greatest similitude with celestials and the world, and that the letters of other tongues have not so great an efficacy because they are more distant from them²¹.

Paracelsus repeats in *De Natura Rerum* of 1537 the kabbalistic belief that Adam in the Garden of Eden understood the signs within things, and thus gave each thing its proper name, and this perfect language was Hebrew²². This notion fits well into Paracelsus's theory of "signatures" expounded in *De Natura Rerum*, according to which the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm is manifested in "seals" and "marks" imprinted on each object of this world. Like Agrippa, Paracelsus made use of alphabets with characters resembling Hebrew letters to which he attributed supernatural powers, especially over spirits and demons. The Renaissance world of black and white magic was filled with quasi-Hebrew names, as a

²¹ Agrippa, p.219.

²² *Paracelsus: Essential Readings*, p.189.

consequence of the Kabbalistic idea that Hebrew is a language which not only 'says' things, but can also 'do' things in the world²³.

Another text dealing with the special character of Hebrew with which Browning was acquainted is George Benson's *A Summary View of the Evidences of Christ's Resurrection* of 1754. This book, which he had received from his father and contained his father's notes, contains "Four Letters Concerning the Study of the Hebrew Scriptures", in which Benson claims that Hebrew is the original language "from whence all others sprang", and that in the Hebrew roots "the true sense of a word is better secured than is possible to be in any other language"²⁴. He continues:

[T]he structure of the Hebrew language...is an internal evidence, that the Hebrew scriptures are of God's own inditing, who only knows the resemblance between the *natural* world and the *spiritual*, and who only is able to give the information this language affords²⁵.

A similar idea about the inherent and mystic tie between signified and signifier in the Hebrew language is conveyed in the 1791 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. According to the entry on Hebrew, Hebrew is almost certainly the original language, and its characters have a "secret meaning":

²³ Eco, p.123.

²⁴ George D. D. Benson, *A Summary View of the Evidences of Christ's Resurrection* (London: J. Waugh, 1754), p.23, 49.

²⁵ Benson, p. 50.

This appears to be the most ancient of all the languages in the world, at least we know of none older; and some learned men are of opinion, that this is the language in which God spoke to Adam in Paradise²⁶.

[A]s the several particular letters of the Hebrew alphabet separately signify the ideas of motion, matter, and space, and several modifications of matter, space, and motion, it follows, that a language, the words of which are composed of such expressive characters, must necessarily be of all languages the most perfect and expressive, as the words formed of such letters, according to their determinate separate significations, must convey the idea of all the matters contained in the sense of the several characters, and be at once a name and a definition, or succinct description of the subject, and all things material as well as spiritual, all objects in the natural and moral world, must be known as soon as their names are known, and their separate letters considered²⁷.

Thus, the idea that Hebrew has special characteristics, and the notion that its letters and words are spiritually and mystically tied to the world, were still believed by many at the end of the eighteenth century, and were most surely a part of Browning's education. Yet during his life-time, the theories about Hebrew underwent a great change due to the emergence of the science of philology, and consequently, linguistics. In the 1880 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Hebrew is no longer regarded ^hmore 'spiritual' and 'original' than other languages: rather, it is described in linguistic terms, and is considered as a language among languages:

as/

²⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Misc. Literature* (Dublin: James Moore, 1791) Vol.4, p.366.

²⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p. 366-7.

Hebrew is a language of the group which since Eichorn has generally been known as Semitic, and of which Arabic and Ethiopic (Southern Semitic), the various dialects of Aramaic, and the language of the Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions are the other chief representatives²⁸.

Having established, in a scientific tone, that Hebrew is not unique but rather one of the members of a family of languages, the writer cannot but mention the traditional ideas on Hebrew and present a refutation of them:

Before the rise of comparative philology it was a familiar opinion that Hebrew is the original speech of mankind...Till quite recently many excellent scholars (including Ewald) have claimed for Hebrew the greatest relative antiquity among the Semitic tongues. But though Hebrew is by far the oldest literature, this does not prove that its structure comes nearest to the original Semitic language. And it is now generally recognised that in grammatical structure the Arabic...preserved much more of the original Semitic forms than either Hebrew or Aramaic²⁹.

This paragraph shows that the old theories about Hebrew are still threatening the author, and that the new linguists in the 1880s were still trying to convince the public of the truth of their ideas. During Browning's adult life, both these theories existed and fought for recognition. Browning's poetry reflects this battle, since he knew both

²⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 9th ed. (1880), p. 595.

²⁹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 9th ed. (1880), p. 596.

the conflicting theories: the mystical ideas on Hebrew from his parents' library, and the ideas of philology from his studies at University College London³⁰.

For Browning, Hebrew is associated first and foremost with the subject of supernatural language, and he is well acquainted with the theories that place Hebrew in a privileged position with regard to other languages. Browning's interest in Hebrew seems to derive from the mystical tradition concerning its nature and its special powers, especially in the idea of God's ineffable name, which is mentioned directly in no less than five poems, and indirectly in many others. In his late poetry Browning begins to incorporate the Hebrew language within his poetry, in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" of *Jocoseria*, and "The Melon-Seller" and "Two Camels" of *Ferishtah's Fancies*.

Browning's interest in Hebrew coincides with his concern with the status of poetic language, and with his belief that human language is inherently flawed but nevertheless aspires to convey some divine truth. Several subjects seem to present themselves in relation to Browning's interest in Hebrew. One such subject is the biblical figure of Moses, who is a recurring interest and symbol in Browning's poetry, and one that I will examine closely. Other subjects include the gallery of historical and fictional Rabbis found in Browning's poetry; Browning's actual use of Hebrew and his purpose in incorporating Hebrew into his poetry; and Browning's use of mystical Jewish texts. Solomon's character and the notion of the ineffable name which aroused a great curiosity in Browning are discussed in the next chapter.

³⁰ Maynard, *Browning's Youth*, 270-278.

The critical response to Browning's use of Hebrew in his late poems was hostile:

Browning was accused of intentional obscurity, especially in relation to "Jochanan Hakkadosh"³¹. This reaction was probably anticipated by Browning, who was used to charges of abstruseness, and the choice of using Hebrew with all its weighty cultural connotations is obviously a meaningful one. Browning was undoubtedly aware of the fact that virtually all his readers were ignorant of Hebrew, and that the effect of the strange characters would be alienating, yet he hoped the readers would also find them awe inspiring due to the traditional status of Hebrew.

This traditional status is reflected in one of the major influences on Browning's perception of Hebrew and its relation to poetry, Robert Lowth's well-known *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753) published in English in 1778 as *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. Lowth begins by stating that the goal of poetry in general is to instruct and entertain, that "it is deservedly supposed to participate in Divine Inspiration", and that it originates from the religious sentiment³². Concerning biblical Hebrew poetry he writes:

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These observations are remarkably exemplified in the Hebrew poetry, than which the human mind can conceive nothing more elevated, more beautiful, or more elegant; in which the almost ineffable sublimity of the subject is fully equalled by the energy of the language and the dignity of the style. And it is worthy observation, that as some of these writings exceed in antiquity the

³¹ Arnold Cheskin, 'Robert Browning and the Hebraic Tradition' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Rutgers University, 1981), p.108.

³² Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: Chadwick, 1787), p.21.

fabulous ages of Greece, in sublimity they are superior to the most finished productions of that polished people. Thus, if the actual origin of poetry be inquired after, it must of necessity be referred to religion; and since it appears to be an art derived from nature alone, peculiar to no age or nation...it must be wholly attributed to the more violent affections of the heart, the nature of which is to express themselves in an animated and lofty tone, with a vehemence of expression far remote from vulgar use³³.

Lowth goes on to state that Hebrew poetry, like ancient poetry from other sources, contains history and morals, "the highest commendation of science and erudition"³⁴.

Lowth often characterises Hebrew poetry as "sublime", and though his general attitude is scientific rather than religious, he far from questions the special position of Hebrew in Western culture. He premises that the Hebrew poetry of the Bible certainly participates in "some Divine Inspiration", and that it is superior to any other poetry, but he also assumes that it has a human rather than a divine origin. Lowth's discussion of the "ineffable sublimity" of Hebrew poetry may help us understand Browning's ideas on and use of Hebrew in his poetry. In chapter XVI, one of several chapters devoted to the sublime in Hebrew poetry, Lowth writes that the sublime in this poetry derives from the "greatness and sublimity of the subject itself" in which they "even exceed the confines of human genius and intellect"³⁵. Lowth describes the sublime experience in Kantian terms, that is, in terms of the imagination being unable to grasp the "immensity and sublimity of the object"³⁶. To conclude Lowth's argument, he

³³ Lowth, p.30.

³⁴ Lowth, p.57.

³⁵ Lowth, p.175.

³⁶ Lowth, p.177.

disagrees with the traditional belief that the Bible is the direct word of God, and, as we can see in the passage I quoted, uses scientific language which seems to suggest that Hebrew poetry is the product of a sentiment "peculiar to no age or nation". Nevertheless, he goes on to reaffirm the superiority of Hebrew poetry, a superiority which he believes stems from divine inspiration coupled with a simple and 'natural' style. Like Lowth, Browning relates Hebrew to the 'ineffable sublime' and to traditional knowledge, yet shows a questioning of the sacred and divine character bestowed upon it in Judaism and Christianity. Both Lowth and Browning are influenced by Rousseau and the debate on the origin of language, and both are seemingly convinced by theory of the natural rather than the divine origin of language, a theory which strips Hebrew of its mystical powers. Yet in spite of this new perspective, they ultimately refuse to dethrone Hebrew, continue to adhere to its traditional status, and treat it very differently from any other language. Thus, Browning vacillates between a rational, scientific argument and mystical views on Hebrew presented by Paracelsus and Christopher Smart, among others.

As far as the form of many of Browning's late poems is concerned, and especially those involving Jewish lore, Lowth's analysis of sacred Hebrew poetry may shed light on Browning's perception and use of some basic tenets of sacred Hebrew poetry. Lowth expatiates on the term "Mashal", which he sees as an essential term in understanding sacred Hebrew poetry. The most straightforward translation of "Mashal" is parable, yet Lowth bases his theory of the style of Hebrew poetry on three different meanings of the word. According to his theory, "Mashal" might imply "the *sententious*, the *figurative*, and the *sublime*"³⁷. The *sententious* aspect of Hebrew

³⁷ Lowth, p.61.

poetry refers to its "frequent and laconic sentences" and the relations between them, whereas the figurative includes parables, metaphor, allegory, and simile³⁸. The sublime aspect of the poetry refers to the mystical message of the poems, which is revealed by a unique spiritual experience in which "the imagination labours to comprehend what is beyond its powers", and results in the understanding that the infinity and immensity of God cannot be grasped by our limited human mind. Browning's "Jochanan Hakkadosh", as well as many of his other late poems, could easily be termed "Mashal": as I shall try to show, "Jochanan Hakkadosh" contains parabolic as well as sublime elements characteristic of sacred Hebrew poetry as it is defined by Lowth. Browning is also heavily influenced by the style of the Talmud, and this influence is mingled with that of sacred Hebrew poetry.

In "Jochanan Hakkadosh" Browning for the first time makes abundant use of transliterated Hebrew words in his poetry³⁹, and includes Hebrew phrases in Hebrew characters at the end of the poem. A couple of issues raised in preceding poems concerned with Hebrew and Judaism return here. The first thing that strikes me in the poems concerned with Jewish lore is the emphasis on the first person plural. The frame story of "Jochanan Hakkadosh" begins in the following way:

‘This now, this other story makes amends
 And justifies *our* Mishna,’ quoth the Jew
 Aforesaid. ‘Tell it, learnedest of friends!’

³⁸ Lowth, p.60.

³⁹Browning did include the transliteration of the Hebrew word for Egypt (Mizraim) in a sonnet named "The 'Moses' of Michael Angelo" written in 1850, but published only in 1914 (*The Poems*, Vol. 2, p.1139).

(1-3, my emphasis)

"Our", a sign of a rooted and dependable collective identity and a pool of shared knowledge, recurs in the poem⁴⁰, as well as in "Doctor -", "Solomon and Balkis", and some of the poems of *Ferishtah's Fancies*. Browning seems to take on a Jewish identity, presenting himself as one of a continuous line of Jewish scholars confident in their acquaintance with some truth. Browning's choice of speaker in these poems is related to the legendary tone of *Dramatic Idyls*, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, and *Asolando: Fancies and Facts*. The speaker is authoritative, benefitting from received communal knowledge, and the effect is one of social rather than self reliance in the search for truth. The first person plural also reminds one of the style of the Talmud which is characterised by a group of speakers debating a subject and trying to reach a conclusion. The style of the Talmud, with which Browning was acquainted, is typically dialectic: different Rabbis comment and give examples with regard to diverse issues raised by the Mishna. The frame of the poem declares that the inside poem is meant to 'justify' the Mishna, and thus he places the poem side by side with the Talmud itself. The Talmud has two other characteristics that are relevant to this poem. The first is the general attitude towards the Mishna, that is, the set of rules with which the Talmud is concerned. The Talmud does not accept these passively but rather questions and debates them from different points of view. This technique must have appealed to Browning, because it has similar premises to those behind his dramatic monologues. The dialogic structure of the Talmud allows for the opinions of many men (but, unfortunately, almost no women), usually without a conclusive

⁴⁰See lines 11, 120, 148, 625 in "Jochanan Hakkadosh", line 257 in "Doctor -", and line 2 in "Solomon and Balkis".

settlement, yet with the realistic assumption that there is only one truth, as we find in the "Epilogue" to *Dramatis Personae* and in *The Ring and the Book*. The second characteristic of the Talmud relevant here is the inclusion of legend and folklore side by side with philosophical arguments and the pragmatic laws of the Mishna.

"Jochanan Hakkadosh" includes Jochanan's deathbed revelation as well as the legends at the end of the poem, and the mixture of legend and truisms is common in *Dramatic Idyls*, *Jocoseria*, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, and *Asolando: Fancies and Facts*.

In a letter to Furnivall, on April 10, 1883, following a misunderstanding of the poem by an American critic, Browning writes about "Jochanan Hakkadosh":

The whole is a fiction of my own, with just this foundation,
- that the old Rabbins fancied that earnest wishing might
add to a valued life⁴¹.

Judith Berlin-Lieberman traces the story back to the Midrash and the Kabbala.

According to the Midrash, Adam finds out that the future King David is allotted only three hours of life, and consequently Adam decides to give David seventy years out of the thousand apportioned to him. In the Zohar, which is part of the Kabbala, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph each give the future king part of their lives, just as Jochanan's disciples grant him part of their lives⁴². Jochanan indeed describes himself as "[m]ore luckless than stood David" when he fought Goliath, and this comparison,

⁴¹ *Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. by T. L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 216-7.

⁴² Berlin-Lieberman, p.62.

made by Jochanan at the outset of his first speech, may indicate that Browning knew the source of the story. In "Jochanan Hakkadosh" the contribution by the four members of the community is made for the sake of the communal knowledge and for truth - since Jochanan has no "truth" to reveal on his deathbed and therefore declares himself a "failure" (42, 117).

Another possible source of information or inspiration could be George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876, six years before "Jochanan Hakkadosh" was written. *Daniel Deronda* is greatly indebted to the kabbala, and Eliot's main source of information, one which was obviously available to Browning as well, was C. D. Ginsburg's *The Kabbalah: its Doctrines, Development and Literature* (1865). In *Daniel Deronda* a specific paragraph brings up the exact theme Browning chose for "Jochanan Hakkadosh" a few years later:

But he was too sane and generous to attribute his spiritual banishment solely to the excusable prejudices of others: certain incapacities of his own had made the sentence of exclusion; and hence it was that his imagination had constructed another man who would be something more ample than the second soul bestowed, according to the notion of the Cabbalists, to help out the insufficient first - who would be a blooming human life, ready to incorporate all that was worthiest in an existence whose visible, palpable part was burning itself fast away⁴³.

⁴³ George Eliot. *Daniel Deronda*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 406.

In a later passage the idea of the joining of souls for the sake of perfection recurs:

“In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished”⁴⁴.

Both Jochanan and Mordechai are wasting away and in search for a young soul to help them complete what they regard as their spiritual mission. Both missions end in success: Mordechai finds a spiritual and physical heir in Daniel Deronda, and Jochanan experiences a revelation of truth thanks to the four souls which grant him a part of their lives.

There is a critical controversy concerning the direct source for the Talmudic legends in "Jochanan Hakkadosh". Judith Berlin-Lieberman claims that Browning's Hebrew was sufficient in order for him to have been familiar with the Talmudic and Kabbalistic sources she enumerates in *Robert Browning and Hebraism*. Although the legends and stories in the poem correspond to the Talmudic and Kabbalistic legends, Arnold Cheskin has shown in a series of essays that the real source is actually Rev. B. Gerrans's edition of the twelfth century *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin* (1784). Cheskin's reliable and detailed analysis shows that Browning's version of the legends relies on Gerrans's information, and that Browning even repeats some of Gerrans's mistakes. The ungrammatical Hebrew at the end of the poem is copied from Gerrans, whose

⁴⁴ Eliot, p.461.

knowledge of Hebrew had room for improvement as well⁴⁵. Gerrans's book was indeed found in Browning's library, inscribed by him on the title page, and his grandfather's name is among the subscribers⁴⁶. Cheskin claims that Browning did his best to conceal his source, because of Gerrans's antisemitic and derogatory introduction to the *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin*⁴⁷. Nevertheless, not all the references to Jewish lore can be traced back to Gerrans's book. Other sources may be Polano's *Selections from the Talmud* of 1876, and discussions held with his Jewish friends⁴⁸.

The unexplained "makes amends" in the first line of the poem refers to the Jewish idea of 'tikkun', meaning 'mending' in Hebrew. The 'tikkun' is an order of prayer and study meant to mend failures on the personal and the cosmological levels. The source for the idea in the kabbala, and the philosophy behind it is that creation after "the breaking of the vessels" is constantly being mended and improved, and that prayer and study quickens the mending of the world. On the personal level, the tikkun helps bring about absolution, and is related to the transmigration of souls discussed in the kabbala. The transmigration of souls can constitute a 'tikkun' by helping to have a soul's flaws repaired⁴⁹. This relates to the subject of Jochanan's prolongation of life by other people's souls, an idea the sources for which are partly kabbalistic as well. Browning's belief in the general improvement of mankind and its growth towards

⁴⁵ Arnold Cheskin, "Jochanan Hakkadosh: Rabbi Ben Browning" *SBHC* 12 (1984), p. 134-147, and "'Tis Only the Coat of a Page to Borrow': Robert Browning's Hebraic Borrowings and Concealments for 'Jochanan Hakkadosh'" *BSN* 20 (1990), p.31-38.

⁴⁶ *The Browning Collections*, p.19.

⁴⁷ Cheskin (1990)

⁴⁸ See Arnold Cheskin's "Robert Browning's Climactic Hebraic Connections with Emma Lazarus and Emily Harris" *SBHC* 10 (1982), p.9-22.

⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p.44.

perfection, expressed in many poems from *Paracelsus* (V, 750-783) to *The Ring and the Book* (I, 707-719), agrees with the Jewish notion of 'tikkun' which he makes use of in this poem. The first line of the poem which refers to the story as one which "makes amends", declares the poem itself as taking part in the process of the 'tikkun', helping the mending of the soul as well as that of creation. Indeed, Browning suggests that the writing of poetry that strives for truth helps the improvement of mankind as well as 'saves the soul'. In *The Ring and the Book*, the 'resuscitation' of the story of the old yellow book, that is, *The Ring and the Book* itself, is part of Man's inclination "to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain/ The good beyond him, - which attempt is growth" (I 715-6). In *The Ring and the Book* Browning compares the rewriting of the original crime story to an act of resuscitation in which man projects his "surplusage of soul" in order to "complete[s] the incomplete and save[s] the thing" (I 723,734). At the end of the poem he writes:

So write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,

Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.

(XII, 862-3)

The idea of 'tikkun' and its relation to the transmigration of souls appealed to Browning because it corresponds to his notion of poetry as a process of 'resuscitation'. "Jochanan Hakkadosh" contains resuscitation on two levels: the prolongation of Jochanan's life on the literal level, and the poem as a 'tikkun' on the symbolical level. In the note to the poem, Browning assumes the voice of the Jewish speaker of the first three lines of the poem:

Thus, instead of the simple reference to 'Moses' stick,' - but what if I make amends by attempting three illustrations, when some thirty might be composed on the same subject, equally justifying that pithy proverb **מחשה עד מחשה לא קם כמשה**.

The repetition of the first speaker's words places Browning in the same position as that of the Jewish scholar wishing to "make amends" with the story about to be told. At the same time, this repetition defamiliarises the poetic technique and draws attention to the poem's 'falsehood', thus returning to the subject of the truth-value of poetry which was brought up in the body of the poem, and is one of its central themes. I shall discuss the three sonnets and the note at the end of the poem with relation to this subject at a later point in my analysis.

"Jochanan Hakkadosh" shares a number of themes with Browning's early works, notably *Paracelsus*. Like Jochanan, in his youth Browning's Paracelsus strove to live like an angel (I, 457-460), and out of this presumption grew disappointment and bitterness. The tsaddik, like Paracelsus, craves "some unrevealed/ Secret ~~will~~ ^{shall} lift mankind above the brutes" (506-7). Jochanan, like Paracelsus, wanted truth and wisdom and found disappointment, yet some truth is revealed to both before they die. Thus, Jochanan shares some of the characteristics of Browning's Romantic heroes, notwithstanding the change of scene.

One of the main concerns of "Jochanan Hakkadosh" as well as many of Browning's other late poems is the relation of poetry to truth. Like *The Ring and the Book* it seeks to show that although poetry may have no literal, historical, truth value, it holds

some symbolical truth, 'truth' which is sometimes puzzling and paradoxical. In order to convey this message, Browning uses one of his favourite techniques: he first presents the antithetical argument, later to be undermined and refuted. One of the five gifts of life is given to Jochanan by a poet, and for the three months of Autumn Jochanan lives the life of a poet. At the end of the Autumn, he reaches the following conclusion:

‘And what’s the Past but night - the deep and dark
Ice-spring I speak of, corpse-thicked with its drowned
Dead fancies which no sooner touched the mark

‘They aimed at - fact - than all at once they found
Their film-wings freeze, henceforth unfit to reach
And roll in aether, revel - robed and crowned

‘As truths, confirmed by falsehood all and each -
Sovereign and absolute and ultimate!
Up with them, skyward, Youth, ere Age impeach

‘Thy least of promises to reinstate
Adam in Eden! Sing on, ever sing
Chirp till thou burst! ...

...Fighting was better! There, no fancy-fling

'Pitches you past the point was reached of yore

By Samsons, Abners, Joabs, Judases,

The mighty men of valour who, before

'Our little day, did wonders none profess

To doubt were fable and not fact, so trust

By fancy-flights to emulate much less.

(523-543)

The "ice-spring" of line 524, is part of an extended metaphor for poetry in which a fount or spring aiming for the sky becomes "enswathed/ In dark and fear", sinks in the dead past, and turns to ice (512-3). Jochanan defines poetry as "falsehood" in the guise of truth, and continues with two arguments against poetry which relate to the status of Hebrew and the Bible. The first concerns the poet's promise to "reinstate/ Adam in Eden": Browning may be referring to Adamic language, the original and supernatural language spoken by Adam in Eden. The words of this language are not arbitrary signs but correspond to the objects they denote, and this language was believed to be Hebrew by many Christian thinkers. In "With Christopher Smart" Browning admires Smart for achieving Adamic language in his poetry, and thus actually fulfilling the most elevated task of poetry. Jochanan derides this attempt on the part of poets, drawing a firm line between poetic language and that primordial divine language spoken in Eden, Hebrew. This argument expresses Browning's doubts concerning poetic language and its ability to convey truths when contrasted with the traditional idea of Hebrew as a supernatural language. The form of the poem "Jochanan Hakkadosh" attempts to do the opposite: the Hebrew phrases and the

transliterated words are incorporated into the poem in the most 'natural' and smooth fashion possible, so as to have the poem participate in some of the aura of Hebrew.

One of the reasons for Browning's insertion of Hebrew in his poems is thus exposed: he wishes to refute arguments against poetry such as Jochanan's, and to convince the reader that poetic language does have some of the properties traditionally attributed to Hebrew.

Jochanan's second argument against poetry is based on a contrast between the 'fables' of poetry and the 'facts' of the military achievements narrated in the Bible. The irony here is that although Jochanan is unable to imagine that anyone would doubt the validity of these exploits, Browning and the reader know that the 'facts' of the bible are being questioned by the higher critics. Browning's response to Jochanan's argument concerning the truth value of poetry is also the key to Browning's movement towards legends and parables in his late poetry. At the end of the poem, before his death, Jochanan divulges:

...- how seem

The intricacies now, of shade and shine,

Oppugnant natures - Right and Wrong, we deem

'Irreconcilable? O eyes of mine,

Freed now of imperfection, ye avail

To see the whole sight, nor may uncombine

'Henceforth what, erst divided, caused you quail -

So huge the chasm between the false and true,

The dream and the reality! ...

(745-753)

In this motto, representative of Browning's philosophy in *The Ring and the Book* and in his later poetry, lies the key to the strange mixture of legendary material and truisms in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" as well as in the poems of *Dramatic Idyls*, *Jocoseria*, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, and *Asolando*. Browning is saying that the dualism of lies and truth, as well as other dualisms, is a product of human misunderstanding, and although legends and poetry are 'falsehoods', they may contain symbolical truths if written and read 'properly'. The main influence on this sort of critical approach is obviously the appearance of many parables in the Bible, and indeed the form of the parable is a popular one with Browning in his late publications. Moreover, Browning's use of Hebrew and references to Jewish lore promote such symbolical readings for two reasons, both related to readings of the Bible. The first reading I am reminded of is that of the Higher Criticism. Although Browning's hostility to Higher Criticism is well known, the most extensive study on this subject, written by Grover Goyne, concludes that in spite of the clash between Browning's irrational faith and the higher critics' rationality, Browning does agree with them on some points⁵⁰. In support of this thesis, Goyne quotes Mrs. Orr's testimony that in 1869 Browning said that although the story of Jesus "may be a fiction", it presents a truth which the human heart requires⁵¹. Strauss's claim that the Bible contains "eternal truths" although

⁵⁰ Grover Cleveland Goyne, *Browning and the Higher Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967)

⁵¹ Mrs. Sutherland Orr, "The Religious Opinions of Robert Browning" *Contemporary Review* LX (1891), p.880.

historically false, and Feuerbach's claim that the myths of the bible are an expression of man's consciousness of divine love, present a critical reading of texts which Browning adopts in relation to his own poetry⁵². Another symbolical reading is suggested by the kabbala and the talmud, and this is the sort of reading encouraged by Browning in the note and three sonnets appended to "Jochanan Hakkadosh". The kabbala treats the Bible as "a symbolic instrument", it searches and expounds on the "mystic and metaphysical reality" behind the text⁵³. As Harold Bloom dramatically puts it, in the kabbala literal meaning is "a kind of death"- the kabbalists read figuratively and audaciously⁵⁴. Although the kabbalists ostensibly accepted the literal level of the Bible, what they actually did was to rewrite it and sometimes even to negate it to the point where they were considered blasphemers by some Jewish thinkers. The question of truth validity reemerges here: what is the validity of their symbolical readings that sometimes contradict the literal meaning of the bible?

In the note to "Jochanan Hakkadosh" Browning brings up the problem of the authority and validity of Jewish rabbinial writing, and relates it to the status of poetic language. Like the talmud or the kabbala, the appendix is a commentary on something mentioned in the primary text using examples and legends. The meaning of the first Hebrew phrase if we rearrange the order of the noun and adjective is "A collection of many lies". Thus, if we look at the meaning of the whole sentence, Browning is saying the authoritative source behind the story is no more than a lie.

⁵² Goyne, p. 20, 28.

⁵³ Eco, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Bloom, *Kabbalah*, p.90-91.

NOTE, - This story can have no better authority than that of the treatise, existing dispersely in fragments of Rabbinical writing, חסך של רביים בדים , from which I might have helped myself more liberally.

The second sentence of the note claims that the three sonnets will "justify" the proverb "From Moses to Moses there arose none like Moses". This is a well known Jewish saying comparing Moses to Moses of Maimonides, a twelfth century Jewish thinker considered one of the greatest Jewish sages. This sentence is also ironic, for the first two sonnets are highly absurd and far from "justify" Moses's greatness, and the third sonnet does not refer to Moses at all. The message behind the ironic style is that the human division between 'false' or 'true' is limited, and that these fantastic tales have no truth value if read literally, but they do contain some truth if read figuratively. Thus the sonnets, as well as the poem, are true and false at the same time, and continue the idea that "oppugnant natures" are only an illusion:

...Though - ignorance confirmed

By knowledge sounds like paradox, I cast

'Vainly about to tell you - fitlier termed -

Of calm struck by encountering opposites,

Each nullifying either!

(683-7)

Accordingly, there is truth in calling Jochanan "sinner-saint, live-dead, boy-man" in spite of the apparent contradiction (lines 747, 800). Apparently, the idea of

"oppugnant natures" nullifying each other is a motif in Browning's works, as Daniel Karlin has pointed out:

Browning is both disturbed and exhilarated by the facility with which contraries can turn into each other, adopt each other's mask, employ each other's rhetoric⁵⁵.

*

The form used by Browning in some of his late poems, and especially in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, in which a short poem in small type is appended to the longer poem, is used in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" for the first time. The appended poems in *Ferishtah's Fancies* usually continue the same theme or express the same sentiment only in a different context. As I have shown, the note continues the theme of truth value and poetry, and the third sonnet conveys a message similar to the one uttered by Jochanan before his death.

Og's thigh-bone - if ye deem its measure strange,
 Myself can witness to much length of shank
 Even in birds. Upon a water's bank
 Once halting, I was minded to exchange
 Noon heat for cool. Quoth I 'on many a grange
 I have seen storks perch - legs both long and lank:
 Yon stork's must touch the bottom of this tank,

⁵⁵ Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds*, p.176.

Since on its top doth wet no plume derange
 Of the smooth breast. I'll bathe there!' 'Do not so!'
 Warned me a voice from heaven. 'A man let drop
 His axe into that shallow rivulet -
 As thou accountest - seventy years ago:
 It fell and fell and still without a stop
 Keeps falling, nor has reached the bottom yet.'

The sonnet, like the last speech by Jochanan in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" and the ending of *The Ring and the Book*, uses a paradox in order to show the reader his or her limits of understanding and from that to infer the sublimity and ineffability of God. In this sonnet, the rivulet is both "shallow" and endless, and the "voice from heaven" mentions human limited capacity with the words "As thou accountest", meaning that our perception of time is restricted. The story is based on a talmudic legend, and its literal truth value becomes irrelevant because of the figurative reading Browning is expecting from his reader.

Another characteristic of the poem which promotes a symbolic reading is the number symbolism. The number three recurs in the content as well as in the form of the poem. The poem is made up of stanzas consisting of three lines⁵⁶; each period of Jochanan's prolonged life lasts three months; the soul lingers in the dead body for three days; the note speaks of three illustrations where "some thirty might be composed"; and the poem ends with three sonnets. In ^{the} first sonnet Moses is said to be "thirty cubits

⁵⁶ This metrical scheme, *terza rima*, is from Dante, and is apt for a poem about salvation. Browning uses it in "The Statue and the Bust" in *Men and Women*.

tx

high", his staff "thirty cubits long", and his leap "thirty cubits more", even though the talmudic source mentions that Moses was "ten ells tall"⁵⁷. Browning inserts this number symbolism so as to encourage a mystical and symbolic reading characteristic of the kabbala.

The first two sonnets are also based on talmudic legends extolling Moses, a biblical character in whom Browning shows special interest. There are fourteen references to Moses in Browning's poetry, the first appearing in *Sordello* of 1840, and the last in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" of 1883. In *Sordello*, Moses is the true, philosophical or metaphysical poet who smites the rock and gives water to the Israelites in the desert, compared with the false poet who supplies the people with illusions:

What, dullard? we and you in smothery chafe,
 Babes, baldheads, stumbled thus far into Zin
 The Horrid, getting neither out nor in,
 A hungry sun above us, sands among
 Our throats, each dromedary lolls a tongue,
 Each camel churns a sick and frothy chap,
 And you, 'twixt tales of Potiphar's mishap,
 And sonnets on the earliest ass that spoke,
 Remark you wonder any one needs choak
 With founts about! Potsherd him, Gibeonites,
 While awkwardly enough your Moses smites
 The rock, though he forego his Promised Land

⁵⁷ Berlin-Lieberman, p.73.

Thereby, have Satan claim his carcass, and
 Dance, forsooth, Metaphysic Poet...ah
 Mark ye the deem first oozings? Meribah!
 And quaffing at the fount my courage gained,
 Recall - not that I prompt ye - who explained...

dim /

(III, 790-806)

Meribah, 'quarrel' in Hebrew, is the name given by Moses to the water of Kadesh, in the Zin desert, where the Israelites were dying of thirst and blamed Moses for their predicament. The example chosen by Browning to illustrate the actions of a philosophical poet, is actually one of loss of confidence in God and in language, as *Numbers 20:7-13* tells us:

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shall bring forth to them water out of the rock: so shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. And Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as he commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.

This is the water of Mer-i-bah; because the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and he was sanctified in them.

Moses could not believe that his words would draw water out of the rock, and he therefore disobeyed the lord's command to "speak...unto the rock", and used his rod instead. Browning's message here is twofold: Firstly, lack of confidence in one's language is what eventually brings forth life saving truth, as in *The Ring and the Book*. Secondly, poetry should strive for symbolic action beyond the linguistic space, and here Moses is likened to the mage of Halberstadt in "Transcendentalism".

Halberstadt/

In "One Word More" in *Men and Women* Moses is contrasted with Dante and Rafael who wish to forsake their usual talent in order to create something for their beloved and thus "to be the man and leave the artist/ Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow" (71-2). Browning places himself together with Moses as two for whom the phrase "Never dares the man put off the prophet" holds true (99). The two stanzas dedicated to Moses's character bring up his problematic relationship with the Israelites and his lack of confidence in his powers as a metaphor for the poet/artist's struggles with himself and with his audience:

IX

Wherefore? Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement!

He who smites the rock and spreads the water,

Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath him,

Even he, the minute makes immortal,

Proves, perchance, but mortal in the minute,

Desecrates, belike, the deed in doing.
 While he smites, how can he but remember,
 So he smote before, in such a peril,
 When they stood and mocked – ‘Shall smiting help us?’
 When they drank and sneered – ‘A stroke is easy!’
 When they wiped their mouths and went their journey,
 Throwing him for thanks – ‘But drouht was pleasant.’
 Thus old memories mar the actual triumph;
 Thus the doing savours of disrelish;
 Thus achievement lacks a certain somewhat;
 O’er-importuned brows becloud the mandate,
 Carelessness or consciousness - the gesture.
 For he bears an ancient wrong about him,
 Sees and knows again those phalanxed faces,
 Hears, yet one time more, the ’customed prelude -
 ‘How shouldst thou, of all men, smite, and save us?’
 Guesses what is like to prove the sequel -
 ‘Egypt’s flesh-pots - nay, the drouht was better.’

X

Oh, the crowd must have emphatic warrant!
 Theirs, the Sinai-forehead’s cloven brilliance,
 Right-arm’s rod-sweep, tongue’s imperial fiat.
 Never dares the man put off the prophet.

(73-99)

The core of Browning's fascination with Moses lies with Moses's complex and intriguing character in the Old Testament and in Jewish commentary. Moses is by far the most important figure in the old testament; the father of the prophets⁵⁸; the person to whom the first five books of the Old Testament were dictated by God; the direct receiver of the ten commandments; and the precursor of Jesus in Christian typology. The "tongue's imperial fiat" raises the subject of Hebrew as a supernatural language with relation to Moses. Moses is the supreme speaker and apprehender of supernatural language: firstly, he holds direct dialogues with God as in the scene of the burning bush, and speaks with God "mouth to mouth":

With him I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?⁵⁹

He is the first person to whom God reveals the ineffable name:

And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them⁶⁰.

In Jewish sources such as the Talmud and the Kabbala, Moses's rod, used to split the sea and to hit the rock, is engraved with the ineffable name, and like Solomon, he is

⁵⁸ *Deuteronomy* 34:10.

⁵⁹ *Numbers* 12:8.

⁶⁰ *Exodus* 6:2-3.

able to use the ineffable name on different occasions. Browning knew these legends, since they were mentioned in Gerrans's *Travels of Benjamin*, a text upon which Browning heavily relies in this poem. "By being Master of the true pronunciation of this Name," Gerrans writes, "Moses performed all his miracles"⁶¹. Yet Moses's "imperial fiat" is only an incomplete description of his ability, for he is "slow of speech":

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say⁶².

Thus, Moses embodies the predicament of the poet as Browning sees it: the human stutter and the lack of confidence in the power of one's words on the one hand, and the God-given "imperial fiat" on the other. Browning expresses this dialectic in *The Ring and the Book*:

I find first,
Writ down for very A.B.C. of fact,
'In the beginning God made heaven and earth;'
From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell

⁶¹ Gerrans, p.120.

⁶² *Exodus* 4:10-12.

And speak you out a consequence - that man,

....

Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.

(I, 707-719)

Here, Browning's poet-persona seems to identify with Moses - the weighty quotation from *Genesis*, traditionally believed to have been dictated by God to Moses, is repeated by Browning with a lisp such as Moses's, and followed by Browning's own 'revelation' of truth. Browning may have thought of Moses while writing these lines, and Moses's human frailty, manifested by the lisp, grants Browning the confidence to utter his own 'truth'.

Moreover, Moses's tumultuous relations with the Israelites are used by Browning as a metaphor for the relations between the poet and his audience. This is certainly the core of the reference to Moses in the lines from *Sordello* quoted before, and one of the main points in "One Word More". Moses's recurring disappointment with his 'audience' is always mingled with a sense of hope for it, and he always goes on trying to enlighten it. This sort of relationship reminded Browning of his own disappointment with the British audience, and his need to keep hoping for the readers' acknowledgment and understanding.

In 1850, Browning translated a sonnet entitled "The 'Moses' of Michael Angelo", a well known poem which was written by the minor Italian poet Giambattista Felice Zappi (1667-1719). The Brownings, who used John Murray's guides among other

guide books, may have read the sonnet in John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* of 1843, in which it appears following a short history of Michael Angelos 'Moses' in St. Peter's in Rome.

The chief interest of this church is derived from the *Moses of Michael Angelo*, one of the most celebrated creations of his gigantic genius. It was intended to form a part of the magnificent tomb of Julius II, the plan of which was so imposing that it is said to have induced the Pope to undertake the rebuilding of St. Peter's...The vicissitudes of this monument form one of the most curious chapters in the history of art...The original design, after all these interruptions, was never executed...These facts are necessary to be borne in mind, because the Moses is not so advantageously seen as it would have been if surrounded by all the accessories of a finished monument. There are few works of art which have been more severely criticised; but in spite of all that has been advanced, it is impossible not to be struck with its commanding expression and colossal proportions...The celebrated sonnet of Giambattista Zappi on the Moses is justly considered one of the finest in the Italian language...⁶³

Two comments on the 'Moses' mentioned in this guide book would have had an appeal for Browning. Browning believed that a work of art is never all the artist aspired it would be, and the fact that the 'Moses' was part of an ambitious project which was never fulfilled corresponds to his belief and may have confirmed its

⁶³ John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* (London: John Murray, 1843), p.381-2.

greatness in his mind. The severe criticism which the statue received corresponds to Browning's belief that great works of art are often misunderstood and therefore rejected by the public who wishes to be 'fed' with easy, accessible works of art. Thus, apart from Browning's interest in 'Moses' the biblical character, the statue of Moses embodies what Browning thought were the major problematics of art: its inherent imperfection and the problem of reception. The statue is also associated with Moses's power of speech in a passage on the 'Moses' from Vasari's *Life of the Most Eminent Painters*, a passage which Browning surely read and which may have impressed him:

[H]is Moses is the most Excellent [of the statues in St. Peter's]...in a word, the whole Figure is exquisite beyond Imagination; the Sculptor having expressed something of that divinity which was in Man that conversed to familiarity with the Deity itself⁶⁴.

Vasari's emphasis on Moses's speech and on his having conversed with God is repeated in Zappi's sonnet and is given a double emphasis by Browning:

And who is He that, sculptured in huge stone,
 Sitteth a giant, where no works arrive
 Of straining Art, and hath so prompt and live
 The lips, I listen to their very tone?
 Moses is He - ay, that, makes clearly known
 The chin's thick boast, and brow's prerogative

⁶⁴ G. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters from Cimabue to the Time of Raphael and Michael Angelo* (London: R. King, 1719), p. 287

Of double ray: so did the mountain give
 Back to the world that visage, God was grown
 Great part of! Such was he when he suspended
 Round him the sounding and vast waters; such
 When he shut the sea o'er Mizraïm.
 And ye, his hordes, a vile calf raised, and bended
 The knee? This Image had ye raised, not much
 Had been your error in adoring Him.

Moses, Browning's metaphor for the struggling poet, here becomes an object of art as well as a metaphor for the artist. The poet who watches the statue, whether it is Zappi or Browning, imagines Moses's voice, in accordance with his own poetic involvement in the power of language. Browning's sonnet is an almost verbatim translation of Zappi's sonnet, except for Browning's strange decision to incorporate a transliterated Hebrew word in the sonnet, 'Mizraïm', meaning 'Egypt', though the word 'Egypt' does not appear in the original sonnet. Browning deviates from his otherwise precise translation so as to remind us of the importance of the Hebrew language in Moses's life story. Moses conversed with God and received the ten commandments in Hebrew, and the splitting of sea on sea, as Browning knew from Gerrans's book, was performed with the rod upon which was etched in Hebrew characters the ineffable name. The inclusion of 'Mizraïm' grants an authority to the speaker resembling that attributed to Moses. It is a word Moses might have uttered with his "so prompt and live/ the lips", and it thus completes the statue and becomes a continuation of that work of art. By including the Hebrew word, Browning adds his own comment to a

translation of a sonnet written on a statue, and the essence of his comment is that his own poetic language strives to emulate the power of biblical Hebrew.

Moses is mentioned at the beginning of "Jochanan Hakkadosh" as well as in the note and sonnets at the end of the poem. The Jewish scholars who discern that Jochanan is dying wish to obtain some last word of "truth" from him (42).

The Rabbi groaned; then, grimly, 'Last as first

The truth speak I - in boyhood who began

Striving to live an angel, and, amerced,

'For such presumption, die now hardly man.

What have I proved of life? To live, indeed,

That much I learned: but here lies Jochanan

'More luckless than stood David when, to speed

His fighting with the Philistine, they brought

Saul's harness forth: whereat, "Alack, I need

' "Armour to arm me, but have never fought

With sword and spear, nor tried to manage shield,

Proving arms' use, as well-trained warrior ought.

' "Only a sling and pebbles can I wield!"

So he: while I, contrariwise, "No trick

Of weapon helpful in the battle-field

‘ “Comes unfamiliar to my rhetoric:

But, bid me put in practice what I know,

Give me a sword - it stings like Moses' stick,

‘ “A serpent I let drop apace.”

(43-61)

Jochanan uses the story of “Moses’s stick” as a metaphor for his own failure to acquire knowledge and to accomplish something with it. In *Exodus* 4:2-5, the transformation of the rod into a serpent is meant to be a positive event, it is a sign affirming God’s existence, and its function is to be used by Moses to convince Pharaoh and the Israelites that he is a true messenger of God. The ‘miracle’ fails, as Pharaoh’s magicians manage to turn their rods into serpents as well. Moses and Aaron’s serpent swallows the magicians’ serpents, but this also fails to convince Pharaoh to obey Moses. Jochanan’s allusion to Moses’s rod turning into a serpent, and the negative interpretation he gives to the story of this miraculous transformation, is explained by Polano in his *The Talmud* in the following way:

Then said Moses: “Why should I mention future captivity to them while they are suffering under their present bondage?”

And God replied: “Thou hast spoken well; say naught of their future troubles.”

"And Moses answered and said, 'But behold, they will not believe me.'"

Moses was wrong in making this response, for God had already said, "They will hearken to thy voice."

So God said: "What hast thou in thy hand?"

This was a rebuke, meaning that by the staff which he carried in his hand he deserved punishment for doubting.

Why did Moses's staff become a serpent? Because he implied falsehood to the Lord, even as did the serpent in Eden⁶⁵.

Towards the end of the poem, following the 'revelation of truth' which he experiences, Jochanan returns to the snake metaphor, and claims that he is free of the "snakes" within him:

Henceforth wormed

'From out my heart is every snake that bites

The dove that else would brood there: doubt, which kills

With hiss of "What if sorrows end delights?"

(687-690)

Jochanan's doubt is linked with Moses's through the reference to the snake, yet Jochanan manages to rid himself of the doubt that is so inherent in Moses's character. Thus, the initial obscure allusion to Moses's stick is fully explained, and Browning's

⁶⁵ H. Polano, *The Talmud: Selections from the Contents of that Ancient Book, its Commentaries, Teachings, Poetry and Legends* (London and New York: Frederick Warne, 1870), p.153.

close reading of the biblical narrative, sensitivity to Moses's character, and possibly even knowledge of the Talmud, manifest themselves in subtle and complex ways.

In "Pisgah Sights" and "Jochanan Hakkadosh" of 1876 and 1883, two different aspects of Moses's character are presented. In "Pisgah Sights" the focus turns to Moses's personal sense of failure and regret, and in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" Moses is treated as a fabulous and fantastic figure. Browning's references to Moses become more complex in his later years: Browning begins to question and explore the myth of Moses rather than accept the conventional reading of Moses's character. In "Pisgah-Sights" Browning imagines Moses's state of mind before his death, and grants him an acceptance of reality based on Browning's philosophy of the necessity of contraries, a philosophy that often appears in his late poetry.

I

Over the ball of it,

Peering and prying,

How I see all of it,

Life there outlying!

Roughness and smoothness,

Shine and defilement,

Grace and uncouthness,

One reconciliation.

II

Orbed as appointed,

Sister with brother,
 Joins, ne'er disjointed
 One from the other.
 All's lend-and-borrow;
 Good, see, wants evil,
 Joy demands sorrow,
 Angel weds devil!

(I, 1-16)

Browning's identification with Moses becomes clear in this poem: Browning's and Moses's voices merge, the poet and the prophet unite in an almost embarrassing gesture. The poems actually tell of a relinquishing of the prophetic role of mediation, of a cessation of the poet/prophet's predicament that is inherent to his role. Yet ironically, it is exactly at this stage of his career that Browning uses a prophetic and didactic voice in his poetry more than he has ever done before.

III

'Which things must - *why* be?'

Vain our endeavour!

So shall things aye be
 As they were ever.

'Such things should *so* be!'

Sage our desistence!

Rough-smooth shall globe be,
 Mixed – man's existence!

IV

Man - wise and foolish,

Lover and scorner,

Docile and mulish -

Keep each his corner!

Honey yet gall of it!

There's the life lying,

And I see all of it,

Only, I'm dying!

(I, 17-32)

Following the misunderstanding of “Jochanan Hakkadosh”, Browning included translations of the Hebrew phrases he used within the body of subsequent poems, so that the insertion of Hebrew did not add to the literal meaning but apparently was there just for its effect on the reader. “The Melon Seller” of *Ferishtah's Fancies* is again in a legendary tone, and includes a didactic moral which appeared only in Hebrew in the first edition, and both in Hebrew and in an English translation in the second edition:

Some say a certain Jew adduced the word

Out of their book, it sounds so much the same,

את-הטוב נקבל מאת האלהים

: In Persian phrase, ואת-הרע לא נקבל :

‘Shall we receive good at the hand of God

And evil not receive?' But great wits jump.

(37-42)

Unlike in "Jochanan Hakkadosh" where the Hebrew inserted in the poem is necessary in order to understand the Jewish world Browning is depicting, in this poem the Hebrew phrase is redundant, and its mere purpose to endow the poem with authority and authenticity.

"Two Camels", another poem from *Ferishtah's Fancies*, includes two Hebrew phrases, which, once more, seem imposed, because the two speakers, Ferishtah and his student, are based in Persia and are supposedly communicating in Persian. The poem is an argument against abstinence, stating that sensual pleasure is God's gift for which we should be thankful. Towards the end of the poem Browning inserted a quotation from *Job*, spoken by Satan and quoted by Ferishtah:

The Adversary said, - a Jew reports, -

החנם רא אוב אלהים:

In Persian phrase, "Does Job fear God for naught?"

(88-90)

The subject of translation which comes up in "A Death in the Desert" recurs here, and once more Hebrew is presented as the original language of the utterance, translated into Persian and then presented in English. Browning's linguistic construction makes use of the cultural status of Hebrew in order to create an illusion of an authentic and

unquestionable source. Hebrew appears again ~~5~~ lines afterwards, and this time with a single word - meaning 'from God':

five

A proper speech were this אלהים
 "Equals we are, Job, labour for thyself,
 Nor bid me help thee: bear, as best flesh may,
 Pains I inflict not nor avail to cure:
 Beg of me nothing thou thyself mayst win
 By work, or waive with magnanimity,
 Since we are peers acknowledged, - scarcely peers,
 Had I implanted any want of thine
 Only my power could meet and gratify."
 No: rather hear, at man's indifference -
 "Wherefore did I contrive for thee that ear
 Hungry for music, and direct thine eye
 To where I hold a seven-stringed instrument,
 Unless I meant thee to beseech me play?"
 (95-108)

The poem, just like "An Epistle... of Karshish" ends with Browning's message simulating the Word, and the name of God in Hebrew clearly adds to the authoritative message. It is quite clear how this sort of didacticism prompted adverse criticism of the kind Browning received for *Ferishtah's Fancies*. Browning was criticised for

being over optimistic and the poetry for being too preachy⁶⁶. The following is Browning's explanation for the insertion of Hebrew:

There was no such person as Ferishtah; and the stories are all inventions. The Hebrew quotations are put in for a purpose, as a direct acknowledgment that certain doctrines may be found in the Old Book which the concocters of novel schemes of morality put forth as discoveries of their own⁶⁷

Thus the Hebrew quotations are inserted so as to form a connection between the Bible and the poems: the Bible is presented as the source for the ideas in the poem, detracting from Browning's originality but adding to his authority.

In conclusion, Browning's treatment of Hebrew is closely related to his impartiality towards other theories of transcendent language, for example Adamic language and the language of magic. Even though a poem such as "Caliban upon Setebos" shows that he is sceptical of ideas on the omnipotence of language, the notion of a language mediating between the divine and the human is too irresistible to be disregarded in his poetry. His special regard for Hebrew stems from his childhood experiences, his love of the Bible, and the attraction of the mystic notions ~~revolving~~ ^{surrounding} this language. It seems improbable that Browning believed that Hebrew was the original language, considering his belief in evolution and the fact that this idea was already undermined

⁶⁶ DeVane, *Handbook*, p. 478.

⁶⁷ W. R. Nicoll and T. J. Wise, eds., *Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stough, 1895), I, p.470-471.

by Locke in 1690 and considered obsolete by the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, I have tried to show that in many of the poems that include or refer to Hebrew, Browning erects a construction at the centre of which stands Hebrew as the original language. Thus, Browning's ambivalence towards supernatural language also applies to the theories attributing supernatural power to Hebrew: these outmoded theories cannot but seem ludicrous and superstitious to an educated nineteenth century man, yet they hold an irresistible charm for the poet striving for powerful poetic language.

The Ineffable Name in Robert Browning's Poems

The idea of the ineffable name obviously appealed to Robert Browning, who refers to it in no less than six works¹. Browning's attraction to this mystical Jewish notion derives from the ideas on language which underlie it: the ineffable name is an instance of supernatural language, language which has a supernatural origin and connects the divine with the human via an agent, in Browning's case, a poet. Browning's knowledge of the notion of the ineffable name stems from his interest in mysticism in general, and more specifically, in Jewish mysticism and Renaissance magic. Thus, Browning may have known the literature on the ineffable name from both the Jewish origins and the Christian mystic texts which adopted the idea, such as Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* or references to the magical power of the Hebrew letters in Agrippa. Coleridge grants the name of God, which he identifies with the Logos, a major part in his philosophy, and although Browning was not one of Coleridge's great admirers, he might have been familiar either with Coleridge's references to the Name of God or with Coleridge's sources, Philo, and Henry More's *Conjectura Cabbalistica* (1653)².

This mystical notion of the ineffable name was losing some of its force in Western culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, undermined by empiricism and the rise of the science of language. In his *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*,

¹ The six works are "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", *The Ring and the Book* 6.279, "Solomon and Balkis", "The Names", "Abt vogler", and "A Pearl, A Girl".

² Coleridge discusses the ineffable Name in *Aids to Reflection* (1825); see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 181. Coleridge's sources are explored in Mary Ann Perkins' *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 63.

Locke completely demystifies the ineffable name of God, rendering it just another arbitrary and conventional sign:

9. *The Name of God not Universal or Obscure in Meaning.* But had all mankind everywhere a notion of God, (whereof yet history tells us the contrary,) it would not from thence follow, that the idea of him was innate. For, though no nation were to be found without a name, and some few dark notions of him, yet that would not prove them to be natural impressions on the mind; no more than the names of fire, or the sun, heat, or number, do prove the ideas they stand for to be innate; because the names of those things, and the ideas of them, are so universally received and known amongst mankind... For, men being furnished with words, by the common language of their own countries, can scarce avoid having some kind of ideas of those things whose names those they converse with have occasion frequently to mention to them³.

Browning is aware of the debunking of the notion of the powerful name of God, and probably found it convincing, yet what initially drew him to the idea is rather its mystic, religious aspect.

The much discussed and developed idea of the ineffable name actually derives from a misunderstanding of the third commandment "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain"; the commandment was read literally, and after the 3rd Century

³ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), Book I, ch.III, 9, p.114.

B.C. Jews refrained from pronouncing the tetragrammaton. In the Talmud and later in the Kabbala, a mystical tradition evolved around the tetragrammaton and other names of God. In the Talmud, a living limb, and finally a whole creature named a Golem is created through the manipulation of the tetragrammaton⁴. The kabbala also claimed that all existing things were formed by God using the creative aspect of the twenty-two Hebrew letters that also exist within our minds⁵. Abraham Ibn Ezra, the twelfth century Jewish philosopher whom Browning read and admired, wrote that the four letters comprising the name of God are the most spiritual of all the Hebrew letters and symbolise the divine in the body of the world⁶. In the thirteenth century, the kabbalists developed this idea, claiming that the tetragrammaton "comprises the divine potency...it comprehends within it the totality of the concealed laws of creation"⁷.

Moshe Idel, who has closely studied the Christian Kabbala, finds discussions of divine names in Christian texts as early as in the thirteenth century, that is, in the century following the emergence of the idea in the Jewish Kabbala⁸. The argument of Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* (1494) is that the divine Tetragrammaton, which contains miraculous powers as it is, gains even greater powers when the Hebrew letter *Shin* is added to it, and constitutes the mystic name of Jesus⁹. Other important and

⁴The first allusion to the power of God's name is in the Talmudic *Sepher Yetzira* (Book of Creation) which is believed to be the true source of the Kabbala and is attributed to Rabbi Akiva who wrote it as early as in the 3rd century.

⁵ Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1994), p.35.

⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press and the Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p.315.

⁷ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 170.

⁸ Moshe Idel, "Introduction to the Bison Book Edition" in Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), no p.n.

⁹ Idel, "Introduction".

famous Christian discussions of the kabbalistic idea of the divine name of God include the writings of two other fifteenth century writers, Pico Della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. Influenced by these writers, Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* (1651) extols the hidden and miraculous powers of the twenty two Hebrew letters, and states that a Hebrew name contains the virtue of the object it denotes¹⁰.

A principal source of information on the ineffable name is a book to which Browning returned time and again: Gerrans's *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin, Son of Jonah of Tudela*, published in London in 1784. Reverend B. Gerrans edited and added many footnotes and an extensive introduction to the original twelfth century text by Rabbi Benjamin. In one of his fabulous stories, Benjamin mentions David El-Roi, a false messiah and "the greatest enchanter", who made use of the ineffable name. Gerrans's note to this passage elaborates on the idea of the ineffable name:

For these and many other Reasons this Name was held in much greater veneration than any other; the People were prohibited the use of it at the Peril of their Lives; the High Priest was only permitted to pronounce it, and that but once in the Year. To avoid profaning it, they therefore called it, in common Conversation, the Name of four; on Account of the four letters of which it was composed; sometimes by way of Eminence they called it the Name. By being Master of the true Pronunciation of this Name, together with the Application of it, as some of the Jews report, Moses performed all his miracles...It is also called by Rabbinical Writers the great Name, the glorious Name, the

¹⁰ Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy: or, Magic*, trans. By J. F. (London: The Aquarian Press, 1971), p.218.

appropriated Name, and the explained Name, or as some translate it, the ineffable Name ¹¹.

As Browning must have learnt from Gerrans, from Jewish sources, or from his Jewish friends, the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton is considered in Judaism dangerous and blasphemous; it is meddling with forces which are beyond human understanding and control. In Browning's poetry, two biblical figures who master the uttering of the tetragrammaton play a special role: Solomon and the High Priest. The prohibition on pronouncing and writing God's name does not apply to the high priest, who is allowed to pronounce it but only in the temple on the Day of Atonement¹². *Bells and Pomegranates*, the obscure and perplexing title which Browning gave to a series of plays and poems published between 1841-1846, shows the importance of the high priest as a symbol in Browning's poetry as well as Browning's admirable knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish culture. As Elizabeth Barrett observed in one of her letters to Browning, in the twenty-eighth chapter of Exodus it is mentioned that bells and pomegranates were attached to the hem of the garment of Aaron, the High Priest¹³. Browning's explanation of this recondite title first appeared in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett:

The Rabbis make "Bells and Pomegranates", symbolical of Pleasure and Profit, the Gay and the Grave, the Poetry and the Prose, Singing and Sermonizing -

¹¹ B. Gerrans, *Travels of Rabbi Benjamin, Son of Jonah of Tudela* (London: n.p., 1784), p.120.

¹² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. by Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), VII, p. 680.

¹³ Kelley and Lewis, *The Brownings' Correspondence* (1993), XI, p.129. 17 October, 1845.

Such a mixture of effects as in the original hour (that is quarter of an hour) of confidence and creation, I meant the whole should prove at last¹⁴.

Judith Berlin-Lieberman has convincingly shown that Browning's explanation is indeed based on different Talmudic interpretations with which Browning must have been familiar. She arrives at the following conclusion:

In the background there looms the figure of the High Priest, he who is invested with the Bells and Pomegranates. The High Priest, by safeguarding the law, and by proclaiming it aloud, becomes the intermediary between God and the people...And it haunts Browning's conception: "Poets should strive to see things as God sees them, and tell men how that is"¹⁵.

In "Abt Vogler" the High Priest uttering God's ineffable name is a musician "extemporizing upon the musical instrument of his invention". Like the title *Bells and Pomegranates*, the poem deals with the poet's relations with god, the audience, and the question of the medium of language. The first stanza is based on an extended simile:

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,
 Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,
 Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon willed

¹⁴ Kelley and Lewis, *The Brownings' Correspondence* (1993), XI, p.131. 18 October, 1845.

¹⁵ Berlin-Lieberman, p. 28-9.

Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,
 Man, brute, reptile, fly, - alien of end and of aim,
 Adverse, each from the other heaven-high, hell-deep removed, -
 Should rush into sight at once as he named the ineffable Name,
 And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved!

(1-8)

The references to Solomon are based on Talmudic and Kabbalistic readings of the biblical story with which Browning is strikingly familiar. The bible merely tells that "God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much...Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt...[f]or he was wiser than all men"¹⁶. The building of the temple is meticulously described, yet no supernatural agents are mentioned in relation to its construction. The Talmud adds that Solomon's wisdom excelled that of any other human being, even Adam's, and that he could make demons obey him and thus transform their evil power into power which is to the advantage of humanity¹⁷. The Kabbala adds that before the construction of the temple, the archangel Michael appeared to Solomon and gave him a small ring on which God's name was engraved as a gift - this ring enabled him to subdue the demons to his will thus forcing them to help him build the temple¹⁸. The Kabbala claims that Solomon knew how to pronounce the true and

¹⁶ *Kings I*, 4:29-31.

¹⁷ *Sanhedrin*, trans. By I. Epstein, 2 vols (London: Soncino Press, 1935), 20B.

¹⁸ *The Zohar*, trans. By Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon (London and Bournemouth: Soncino Press, 1949), III 233a-233b, 112b, 208a.

most powerful name of God, and that he uttered it in order to force Satan and his sons out of the temple¹⁹. In the Kabbala, the acquisition of the ineffable name allows access to both knowledge and power, and the first stanza of "Abt Vogler" clearly puts the emphasis on power. Browning's knowledge of the other function of the ineffable name is manifested in the later "Solomon and Balkis" where the ineffable name is used in order to obtain the truth from both Solomon and Balkis. The stress on power in the use of the ineffable name in "Abt Vogler" is strengthened by the fact that both angels and demons, "alien of end and of aim" are called in by Solomon, not to build the temple, his most honoured achievement, but to build a palace for one of his wives. Thus, Browning chooses to have Vogler compare his own creation to Solomon's extravagant structure built for mere pleasure rather than for God. The theme of the overreacher striving for power and pleasure is one that Browning had explored in his early narratives, especially in Paracelsus. Solomon's character, as it emerges from the Bible and the Rabbinical writings, contains a similar theme. *Kings I* states that Solomon transgressed the divine command that a king "shall not multiply horses to himself...[n]either shall he multiply wives to himself"²⁰

And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines:

and his wives turned [^]his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old,

that his wives turned [^]his heart after other ^QGods...[a]nd Solomon did evil in the

away /
away |
(e.c.)

¹⁹ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), p.165.

²⁰ *Deuteronomy*, 17:16-7.

sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father²¹.

In the Talmud, Solomon's transgressions are attributed to his vanity over his wisdom - because of these sins Solomon gradually loses his throne, his wealth, and his wisdom, and travels as a mendicant for three years, at which time he is supposed to have written *Ecclesiastes*²². Both Solomon and Paracelsus, in spite of their ultimate failure, experience divine revelation, and Solomon even manages to build a temple hallowed by God, where the people and God commune²³. Abt Vogler himself fits into the same category, and Browning's carefully chosen reference to Solomon's weakness for women, the source of his destruction, implies that Vogler also has a weakness which would bring to his own downfall. The second stanza further insinuates a similarity between Solomon, Paracelsus, and Vogler:

lead

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,
 This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!
 Ah, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now combine,
 Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master his praise!
 And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell,
 Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of things,
 Then up again swim into sight, having based me my palace well,
 Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether springs.

(9-16)

²¹*Kings I*, 11:3-6.

²²*Sanhedrin* 20b, 21a.

²³*Kings I*, 9:3.

The Talmudic story of Solomon's summoning of demons for the building of the temple is used to arouse Faustian connotations, and the speaker's ruin seems imminent. Yet just like Goethe's Faust, Solomon, and Browning's Paracelsus, some feeling of transcendence is finally achieved, and the hero's sense of failure is not absolute. Nevertheless, the uncertainty regarding the validity of that transcendence remains in both Paracelsus's and Vogler's case: Paracelsus's revelation may be just a deathbed hallucination, and Vogler's could be a megalomaniac's illusion. The inability of language to convey the transcendence achieved by music in the poem is accompanied by an ambiguous and problematic metaphor in the first two stanzas. Tom Furniss has suggested that the metaphor of extemporized music as a building is inherently unstable because music will not "tarry"; the poem's "whole movement is towards forging the metaphorical link between 'music' and 'building', between music and poetry, but the very forging of that link is, at the same time, a forgery"²⁴. The initial metaphor is unclear as well as unstable: there is an inherent ambiguity concerning the subject of the two lines in the first stanza.

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,
 Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,
 Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon willed...

(1-3)

The verb "bidding" may apply to both "the structure brave" and the "I", thus rendering the sentence ambiguous: who or what is in control and responsible for the music, is it

²⁴ Tom Furniss, "‘Would that the structure brave...’: An Essay on ‘Abt Vogler’", *BSN*, 13:1 (1983), 19-29, (p.21, 29).

Vogler or the musical piece itself which exists in a divine realm before actually manifesting itself through Vogler? This second reading is strengthened in stanza IV where Vogler, depicting the creative process, states that "Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I" (line 26). This ambiguity is characteristic of the inability to know whether the transcendent experience in the poem is an illusion or not, and the same ambiguity is transferred to the idea of the ineffable name. The notion of omnipotent language embodied in the ineffable name stands in contrast to the failure of language in the poem itself. As in *Pauline* and "Transcendentalism" supernatural language is an alluring concept with a dubious status.

Vogler's experience contains certain parallels to ecstatic religious experiences evoked by the uttering of the ineffable Name described in the Kabbala. The Jewish mystic way involved the ascent of the soul to a state of ecstatic rapture through a process of meditation on the divine Name. In the Lurianic Kabbala prayer results in near ecstatic rapture through meditations on one of the letter combinations of the Tetragrammaton and its different vocalizations. In the thirteenth century, Abulafia and his disciples wrote about a mystic and prophetic experience based on the uttering of the ineffable name, an experience that holds a resemblance to Vogler's ecstasy.

Appreciate that whoever knows the name of God has the spirit of God, the holy spirit, within him...When you look at these holy letters in truth and reliance and when you combine them...these letters will all roll backwards and forwards with many melodies...Afterwards, if he is worthy, the spirit of the living God will pass over him and the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit

of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...then return to the matters of the body, rise and eat and drink a little, or refresh thyself with a pleasant odor, and restore thy spirit to its sheath until another time, and rejoice at thy lot and know that God loveth thee!²⁵

Abulafia is well known for the comparison he made between the manipulations of the ineffable Name and music, saying these can be used to obtain freedom from natural forms, and open the soul to divine influx and even to prophecy²⁶. Vogler's ecstatic experience includes a meditation on the ineffable Name, the use of music as a means to divine revelation, the sublime experience, and then a "return to the matters of the body", in Vogler's case, sleep. I have not found references to Abulafia in those letters by Browning which have been published, but the fact that he had read Ibn Ezra's writing in 1864 seems to make the possibility of his reading Abulafia more probable. Both Abulafia and Ibn Ezra were Spanish Jewish philosophers, Abulafia writing in the thirteenth century and Ibn Ezra in the preceding century, and neither was translated into English by 1864. Thus, both "Abt Vogler" and "Rabbi Ben Ezra" were at least partially influenced by medieval Jewish philosophy, and indeed, Browning places them one after the other in *Dramatis Personae*.

In "Mr Sludge, 'The Medium'", the idea of the ineffable name's power is perceived by Sludge as characteristic of an evolutionary primitive stage, and consequently derided. Sludge mentions it in an argument for the "Strict sympathy of the immeasurably great/

²⁵From Louis Jacob's *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, (New York: Schocken, 1976), p.57-63. This passage was translated into German in 1887 (Jacobs 56).

²⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 631.

With the infinitely small", which manifests itself in "signs and omens", cues sent by God (lines 1070-1, 971):

Please, sir, go with me

A moment, and I'll try to answer you.

The 'Magnum et terribile' (is that right?)

Well, folk began with this in the early day;

And all the acts they recognized in proof

Were thunders, lightnings, earthquakes, whirlwinds, dealt

Indisputably on men whose death they caused.

There, and there only, folk saw Providence

At work, - and seeing it, 'twas right enough

All heads should tremble, hands wring hands amain,

And knees knock hard together at the breath

O' the Name's first letter; why, the Jews, I'm told,

Won't write it down, no, to this very hour,

Nor speak aloud: you know best if't be so.

(1075-1088)

Sludge's perception of the idea of the ineffable name as the product of primitive fear of God's strength coincides with the ideas on the primitive mind put forth by Browning in "Caliban Upon Setebos". Considering Browning's belief in a divinely planned process of evolution²⁷, this parallel may certainly suggest that in spite of the

²⁷*Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. by T. L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1933), p.200-201.

charm that omnipotent language holds for Browning, he does perceive ideas such as the one of the ineffable name as belonging to a primitive stage of cultural progress.

Because to talk about Him, vexes - ha,
 Could He but know! and time to vex is now,
 When talk is safer than in winter-time.
 (17-19)

[What, what? A curtain o'er the world at once!
 Crickets stop hissing; not a bird - or, yes,
 There scuds His raven that has told Him all!
 It was fool's lay, this prattling! Ha! The wind
 Shoulders the pillared dust, death's house o' the move,
 And fast invading fires begin! White blaze -
 A tree's head snaps - and there, there, there, there,
 His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him!
 Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
 (284-292)

It seems that Browning, like Sludge, regards the idea of the ineffable Name as primitive, yet this does not abate his attraction to this notion. Sludge's derogatory tone towards Jewish lore, as well as towards black people and the Irish (see lines 32-33) is an essential part of Browning's unfavourable characterisation of Sludge, yet Sludge's views on the tendency to attribute omnipotence to language represent one aspect of Browning's own views on the matter. Browning seems to acknowledge the

primitive and irrational in notions such as the one of the ineffable Name whilst continuing to find them alluring.

The mentioning of "the breath / O' the Name's first letter" (1085-6) is a reference to the Kabbalistic idea discussed in *The Source of Wisdom*, in which the author seeks to show how the name of God derives from the movement of Alef, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is 'pure breath'. The world of language is born from the letter Yod, the first letter of the tetragrammaton, which is the "bubbling source". Whoever manages to place himself at the root of this movement of language, by pronouncing it, for example, in the right way, "embraces all language and all expressions of the essential essence and hence becomes a master of all wondrous effects"²⁸. Browning may have encountered this theory either in the Kabbala itself or in the Christian Kabbala, for instance, in Johann Reuchlin's works. "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" also contains a reference to Gematria, the Kabbalistic interpretive method based on the idea that each Hebrew letter and word has a numerical value that could be calculated. For example, adding up the numerical value of the four letters of God's name results in the number seventy-two, and hence the idea of the seventy two hidden names of God (Eco 28). Sludge's interest in this technique is clearly mocked by Browning:

To give you a notion, now - (let who wins, laugh!)

When first I see a man, what do I first?

Why, count the letters which make up his name,

And as their number chances, even or odd,

Arrive at my conclusion, trim my course:

²⁸ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p.332.

Hiram H. Horsefall is your honoured name,

And haven't I found a patron, sir, in you?

(1027-1033)

The ridiculousness of this technique is contrasted with the sense of respect towards Kabbalistic ideas manifested in "Solomon and Balkis" of *Jocoseria* published in 1883. This collection of poems evinces a keen interest in Hebraism: "Solomon and Balkis", "Adam, Lilith, and Eve", and "Jochanan Hakkadosh" are based on Talmudic and Kabbalistic ideas and exhibit Browning's knowledge of the Jewish tradition. "Solomon and Balkis" presents a different aspect of the ineffable name from the one offered in "Abt Vogler". Abt Vogler's emphasis on the practical power of the ineffable name is contrasted with the epistemological aspect of the name in this poem: it is used here to obtain knowledge and wisdom rather than strength. In this poem, the "truth-compelling Name" reveals the brutishness behind human behaviour rather than brings about heavenly rapture. The effect of looking at the Name is that Solomon reveals that his main motivation is self-love, and Balkis divulges that hers is sexual desire. The ineffable name is the catalyst in the movement from the sublime to the earthly, whereas in "Abt Vogler" it instigates a sublime experience.

And in that bashful jerk of her body, she - peace, thou scoffer! -

Jostled the King's right-hand stretched courteously help to proffer,

And so disclosed a portent: all unaware the Prince eyed

The Ring which bore the Name - turned outside now from inside!

The truth-compelling Name! - and at once 'I greet the Wise - Oh,

Certainly welcome such to my court - with this proviso:

The building must be my temple, my person stand forth the statue,

The picture my portrait prove, and the poem my praise - you cat, you!'

(29-36)

The status of the ineffable name remains unquestioned here: the idea is not derided as it is in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" and in *The Ring and the Book*, because the tone of the poem is anecdotal and the story has a legendary status:

Solomon King of the Jews and the Queen of Sheba, Balkis,

Talk on the ivory throne, and we may well conjecture their talk is

Solely of things sublime: why else has she sought Mount Zion,

Climbed the six golden steps, and sat betwixt lion and lion?

(1-4)

The details concerning Solomon's throne are not to be found in the Bible, for they are taken from the Talmud where we read that "there were six steps leading to Solomon's throne, and each step had two lions, one of each side"²⁹. This poem is an example of Browning's movement from the dramatic monologue towards the form of dramatic narratives with legendary or fabulous overtones in *Dramatic Idyls* and in his later collections. The speaker assumes a Talmudic voice and poses a rhetorical question before presenting what seems like a legend in poetic form. Thus the attitude towards the idea of the ineffable name is sympathetic though unserious, and taken allegorically rather than literally.

²⁹ Berlin-Lieberman, p.78.

Solomon's blasphemous vanity relates him to Paracelsus, and to less blasphemous speakers who nevertheless put too much emphasis on their own power such as the speaker of "Transcendentalism", and Abt Vogler. All these speakers employ supernatural language, whether religious or magical, in order to connect between the divine and the human.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Caponsacchi tells the judges of his fears at the time before the taking of the priest's vows, when he must "[d]eclare the world renounced", because he feels "too weak" and "[u]nworthy" (VI, 263, 270-1). The vows, like the ineffable name, are an instance of a linguistic act that ties man to god, and indeed, Caponsacchi's Bishop uses the notion of the ineffable name in his argument to persuade Caponsacchi to take the vows.

I stopped short awe-struck. 'How shall holiest flesh
Engage to keep such vow inviolate,
How much less mine, - I know myself too weak,
Unworthy! Choose a worthier stronger man!'
And the very Bishop smiled and stopped the mouth
In its mid-protestation. 'Incapable?
Qualmish of conscience? Thou ingenuous boy!
Clear up the clouds and cast thy scruples far!
I satisfy thee there's an easier sense
Wherein to take such vow than suits the first
Rough rigid reading. Mark what makes all smooth,

Nay, has been even a solace to myself!
 The Jews who needs must, in their synagogue,
 Utter sometimes the holy name of God,
 A thing their superstition boggles at,
 Pronounce aloud the ineffable sacrosanct, -
 How does their shrewdness help them? In this wise;
 Another set of sounds they substitute,
 Jumble so consonants and vowels - how
 Should I know? - that there grows from out the old
 Quite a new word that means the very same -
 And o'er the hard place slide they with a smile.
 Giuseppe Maria Caponsacchi mine,
 Nobody wants you in these latter days
 To prop the Church by breaking your back-bone, -
 As the necessary way was once, we know,
 When Dioclesian flourished and his like;
 That building of the buttress-work was done
 By martyrs and confessors: let it bide,
 Add not a brick, but, where you see a chink,
 Stick in a sprig of ivy or root a rose
 Shall make amends and beautify the pile!

 Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give it us!
 Let us have you, and boast of what you bring.
 We want the pick of the earth to practise with,

Not its offscouring, halt and deaf and blind

In soul and body.

(VI, 268-313)

This passage is concerned with the motif of lies and truth that runs throughout *The Ring and the Book*; the value of human speech, in this case performative acts, is here examined³⁰. The Bishop's argument shows his disrespect for holy language, even for the priest's sacred vows, in favour of pragmatism. The seriousness of the vows as performative acts is overlooked and denied for the pragmatic behest: "Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give it us!"(309). The Bishop compares the vows to the "ineffable sacrosanct", but misinterprets the Jewish tradition in which the ineffable name is not pronounced because it has inherent powers which are difficult to contain and not in order to shirk holy duty. The Bishop replaces the Jewish act of respect with an act of disrespect towards holy language and God. The Bishop attributes the prohibition to pronounce the ineffable name to the Jews' "superstition", and merely borrows the technique generated by their "shrewdness" (282-284). As in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", the speaker's rejection of the Jewish tradition concerning the ineffable name as superstitious and outmoded is qualified by the speaker's limited views: irony cancels out the speaker's rejection. In "Book X" the Pope criticises the church for such acts as the Bishop's:

Where are the Christians in their panoply?

³⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), ch. 1.

The loins we girt about with truth, the breasts
 Righteousness plated round, the shield of faith,
 The helmet of salvation, and that sword
 Of the spirit, even the word of God, - where these?
 Slunk into corners!

...And I, despite myself,

How can I but speak loud what truth speaks low,
 'Or better than the best, or nothing serves!'

(X, 1565-1579)

The poem continues to discuss an issue related to that of the ineffable name and produces a serious criticism of the idea, unlike the Bishop's.

Five years since, in the Province of To-kien,
 Which is in China as some people know,
 Maigrot, my Vicar Apostolic there,
 Having a great qualm, issues a decree.
 Alack, the converts use as God's name, not
Tien-chu but plain *Tien* or else mere *Shang-ti*,
 As Jesuits please to fancy politic,
 While, say Dominicans, it calls down fire, -
 For *Tien* means heaven, and *Shang-ti*, supreme prince,
 While *Tien-chu* means the lord of heaven: all cry,
 'There is no business urgent for despatch
 As that you send a legate, specially

Cardinal Tournon, straight to Peking, there
 To settle and compose the difference!
 So have I seen a potentate all fume
 For some infringement of his realm's just right,
 Some menace to a mud-built straw-thatched farm
 O' the frontier, while inside the mainland lie,
 Quite undisputed-for in solitude,
 Whole cities plague may waste or famine sap:
 What if the sun crumble, the sands encroach,
 While he looks on sublimely at his ease?
 How does their ruin touch the empire's bound?

(X, 1590-1612)

The Pope doesn't seem to attribute much importance to the socially agreed sign
 signifying God, and his message is that the name for god is a mere superficiality, a
 cosmetic detail, and that it should not be the focus of attention while the meaning, the
 signified, is overlooked. This approach, influenced by Locke and his followers, is alien
 to the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions concerning Hebrew and the ineffable
 name, according to which the name of God in Hebrew is intrinsically connected to
 God's being and his power. The Pope's view of language as conventional and devoid
 of supernatural power is repeated in 'Book X', as well as by the poet in 'Book XII',
 "The Book and the Ring".

Therefore this filthy rags of speech, this coil
 Of statement, comment, query and response,

Tatters all too contaminate for use,
 Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
 The Word. We men, in our degree, may know
 There, simply, instantaneously, as here
 After long time and amid many lies,
 Whatever we dare think we know indeed
 - That I am I, as He is He, - what else?
 But be man's method for man's life at least!

(X, 372-381)

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
 (Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
 Of many which whatever lives should teach:
 This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
 Our human testimony false, our fame
 And human estimation words and wind.
 Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
 Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
 That Art remains the one way possible
 Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least.

(XII, 831-840)

The option of language that is both supernatural and human, exemplified by the ineffable name and Hebrew, is overlooked. For the Pope, the Word is in a class different from that of human speech. Human speech can be used merely for everyday

pragmatic things such as denoting objects "I am I, as He is He" (380), the reason being the unbridgeable gap between human language and the Word. The Pope's pessimistic view of human language is only partially shared by the poet in 'Book XII'. Even though "human speech is naught", poetic language, and art in general, may contain an inkling of truth, and the poet's truth in *The Ring and the Book* is that "human speech is naught". Browning ends his longest poem with this paradox, sending the reader into a confusion which accentuates the limits of the human mind and thus corroborates the speaker's view that "human estimation [is] words and wind".

J. L. Austin's distinction between performative and constative linguistic acts may aid us in understanding Browning's ideas on language in *The Ring and the Book* as well as in his work as a whole. A constative utterance, maintains Austin, describes some state of affairs, such as 'the sky is pink', and therefore has the property of being true or false. The performative utterance performs an action rather than depicts one, and accordingly it has no truth value³¹. Examples of performative utterances are promising, naming, ordering, cursing, and blessing. In *The Ring and the Book* human speech is always a lie, but performative acts, such as the priest's vows or the Pope's commands, may have great power. The performative rather than the constative acts connect men and women to god. The ineffable name, like poetry, is both performative and constative in that it has truth value as well as performative power.

The relevance of the ineffable name to the poet is put forward by Browning in "The Names", a sonnet written in 1884 for the *Shakespearean Show Book*. In this sonnet,

³¹ Austin, ch. 1.

Browning directly confronts the issue of the ineffable name and its relation to poetic language:

Shakespeare! - to such name's sounding, what succeeds

Fitly as silence? Falter forth the spell, -

Act follows word, the speaker knows full well,

Nor tampers with its magic more than needs.

Two names there are: That which the Hebrew reads

With his soul only; if from lips it fell,

Echo, back thundered by earth, heaven and hell,

Would own 'Thou didst create us!' Naught impedes

We voice the other name, man's most of might,

Awesomely, lovingly: let awe and love

Mutely await their working, leave to sight

All of the issues as - below - above -

Shakespeare's creation rises: one remove,

Though dread - this finite from that infinite.

In the first four lines of the octave the metaphor of Shakespeare's name as a spell seems a bit forced; the attribution of magical power to Shakespeare's name seems hyperbolic, for "the spell" is followed neither by "silence" nor by "act". Browning likens himself to a magician "falter[ing] forth the spell" of Shakespeare's name, thus metaphorically employing supernatural language in which "act follows word", but the pun on "act" once more accentuates the hyperbole: it is not real action miraculously stimulated by a word, but an act in one of Shakespeare's plays. The emphasis in the

first four lines is thus on supernatural language as a metaphor, but in the next four lines supernatural language in which real action "follows word" is introduced in the shape of the idea of the ineffable name.

In lines 5-8 Browning goes on to present the Kabbalistic idea that the uttering of the name of God which binds together the Sefirot gives the speaker control over the whole of creation because it contains the whole world within it³². "The Hebrew" replaces the poet/magician of the first four lines in the privileged position of the utterer of supernatural language, and the role takes a shift as well. The magician's spell is uttered intentionally though falteringly, whereas the ineffable name unwittingly "falls" from the Hebrew's lips. The effect of the name's power is prodigious: the whole of creation lays itself at the feet of the speaker of the ineffable name, making him their god. The ambiguity of the pronoun "thou" opens up what Browning found an intriguing and controversial issue in Jewish mysticism related to the idea of the ineffable name. This issue is the power struggle between God and a 'special' individual, an issue strongly related to supernatural language, and most clearly discussed by Browning in *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*. The power struggle between god and the specially endowed individual is inherent to the notion of the ineffable name. Since, according to the Talmud and Kabbala the world was created by God using the twenty two Hebrew letters, and humans were given these letters by God, they were actually given the power to create. The Talmud claims that the Tzaddiks (the righteous) were able to create the world anew, and even create a human clone, i.e., a 'golem'³³. The method of creation in *Sepher Yetzira* and in the Kabbala is

³² Henry Morely, "Afterword" in Cornelius Agrippa's *Occult Philosophy: or, Magic* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1971), p.243.

³³ *Sanhedrin* 65:72.

manipulations of the four letters of the ineffable name. The righteous Jew manipulating the tetragrammaton, the magician, and the poet all wish to create using language, and hence the comparison between them in this sonnet.

Browning's interest in Hebraism is further revealed in this analogy of "the Hebrew", the magician, and the poet. The Hebrew is perceived as placed in a privileged position due to his knowledge of Hebrew that ties him to God and to supernatural power. The Hebrew is set in a spot superior to that of the poet and the magician because he may gain power over the whole of creation, whereas the uttering of Shakespeare's name conjures up Shakespeare's creation, one remove from God's. Thus, Browning employs the traditional Jewish idea of the Hebrew people as chosen by God as a metaphor for the position of the poet.

The sonnet contrasts three kinds of language: magic language, Hebrew as a supernatural religious language, and the language of literature. The sonnet simultaneously compares and distinguishes between the realms of the divine and the literary. In the background is the poet's fantasy of creating with poetic language a tangible world that constitutes his self-created universe. The poet here seems to be a sort of earthly God, his language not as powerful as God's, yet more accessible for people to enjoy. The attraction of the idea of the ineffable name is here exposed: the ineffable name constitutes Browning's fantasy of perfect poetic language characterised by the power to create like God's Word, and the ability to mediate between the divine and the human. Yet the failure of this juxtaposition is embedded in the comparison, and as we have seen in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", in spite of the appeal of the

notion of the ineffable name, Browning's rational criticism of this idea is lingering in the background.

**“God is the perfect poet”: God's Word and Human Speech in
Browning's Works**

The Word of God, in its various senses, is of major importance to Browning's thought: he questions it, adores it, and emulates it, and always with relation to and in comparison with poetic language, its authority and truth value. What is the Word of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition? Walter J. Ong discerns five senses of the Word, all of which are interconnected, since the lines between the different senses seem to be blurred. The first sense is very similar to the definition of magic spells:

In the Bible, as in some other religious traditions, the word of God refers to an exercise of divine power. God's word is efficacious. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,” reads psalm 32(33), which continues, “He spoke, and it was made; he commanded, and it stood forth.”¹

We can see an allusion to this sense in Browning's “By the Fire-Side”, where the lovers experience spiritual merger:

Think, when our one soul understands
The great Word which makes all things new,
When earth breaks up and heaven expands,

¹Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p.182.

How will the change strike me and you

In the house not made with hands?

(131-5)

Another example of the power of the Word of God appears in “An Epistle...of Karshish”:

And first - the man’s own firm conviction rests

That he was dead (in fact they buried him)

- That he was dead and then restored to life

By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:

- ‘Sayeth, the same bade ‘Rise,’ and he did rise.

(97-101)

This first sense of the Word of God also refers to a communication between God and man. Furthermore, sometimes the universe itself speaks of God or as God, as in Psalm 18: “The heavens declare the glory of God”. The second sense of the Word according to Ong is used by Browning in many poems.

The word of God can also mean God’s communication to the Prophets or others who are to speak out for him...From this sense another readily derives, that of the utterance of the prophets or others speaking what God has given them to speak as from him. The prophet would ordinarily know that his

message came from God, but in biblical accounts he also might not².

In this category is included the ending of “An Epistle...of Karshish”, where Karshish reiterates what Lazarus heard from Jesus. In “A Death in the Desert”, John describes how the Word of God was revealed to him:

Afterward came the message to myself
 In Patmos isle; I was not bidden teach,
 But simply listen, take a book and write,
 Nor set down other than the given word,
 With nothing left to my arbitrament
 To choose or change: I wrote, and men believed.
 (139-144)

The Pope in *The Ring and the Book* aspires to some divine revelation, though he is uncertain whether it will actually occur:

In God's name! Once more on this earth of God's,
 While twilight lasts and time wherein to work,
 I take His staff with my uncertain hand,
 And stay my six and fourscore years, my due
 Labour and sorrow, on His judgment-seat,
 And forthwith think, speak, act, in place of Him -

²Ong, *The Presence*, p.183.

The Pope for Christ.

(X, 162-168)

Like the Pope, Browning's poets also take upon themselves to utter God's truth, while simultaneously acknowledging its elusiveness. The third sense of the Word is God's "communication to the inspired writers of the Bible"³. The previous quotation from "A Death in the Desert" fits into this category, as do many of Browning's references to Moses, who is supposed to be the author of the Old Testament according to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The fourth sense of the Word according to Ong is

what was actually written down in the original texts of the Bible and, by indefinite extension, in copies of these texts and in translations and copies of translations and translations of translations, and so on.

(184)

The Bible is a major source of inspiration for Browning, a fact that is manifest throughout his work, and the numerous biblical characters and biblical allusions in his poems and plays need not be enumerated here. What is of importance here is Browning's interest in the status of the Word of the Bible. "Fust and his Friends" is concerned with the type and the circulation of the Word, and whether the many copies of the Word will not attenuate its power. As I have shown in the chapter on

³Ong, *The Presence*, p.183.

Browning's use of Hebrew, Browning employs Hebrew in his late poems in order to attribute a Bible-like aura to his work. Nevertheless, there is also a skepticism in Browning's mind concerning the authority of the Bible, a skepticism that may have been inspired by the Higher Critics, yet does not weaken his faith in the fundamentals of Christianity. Such an awareness of the question of the authority of the Bible is expressed in "Fears and Scruples" of *Pacchiarotto*, where God is an "unseen friend" sending anonymous letters which may or may not be a forgery.

Pleasant fancy! for I had but letters,
 Only knew of actions by hearsay:
 He himself was busied with my betters;
 What of that? My turn must come some day.
 'Some day' proving - no day! Here's the puzzle.
 Passed and passed my turn is. Why complain?
 (9-14)

The last sense of the Word of God is Jesus Christ. "[T]he Word or Son, the Second person of the Trinity, is the primary "utterance" of the Father, equally eternal"⁴. In *The Ring and the Book* The Pope quotes *John* xiv 6:

...He, the Truth, is, too,
 The Word.

⁴Ong, *The Presence*, p.185.

(X, 375-376)

Having covered the different essential meanings of the Word of God in general, I would like to explore Browning's interest in the Word in relation to his ideas on language and poetry. In the centre of many of Browning's poems stands a dualism of ordinary speech and God's all powerful Word, a dualism based on Judaeo-Christian thought. Browning is troubled by the idea of an unbridgeable schism between God's language and human language, and the poems dealing with this predicament usually offer an achievable though hard to come by solution. The background to this preoccupation can be traced back to Jewish and Christian theology, and particularly to Puritan theory. The question that interests Browning and emerges in his poems and plays is the following: can we humanly achieve supernatural language, and accordingly, the revelation of truth? This question leads us directly to the debate on the nature of the word of the Bible. There are two possible answers to this question, which have been presented by different Christian factions. Some, like John Owen⁵ and other Puritans contend that the Bible contains the actual supernatural Word. Alternatively, the second position which splits the supernatural Word from simple human language, is presented by the Quaker thinkers who claim that even the word of the Bible can be no more than human

⁵This claim is presented in his *Of the Divine Originall, Authority, self-evidencing Light and Power of the Scriptures*, published in 1659. For other Puritans thinkers who held the same view, see Nigel Smith's *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Tradition 1640-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 274.

language, even though it is uttered by divine speakers. Among the Puritans themselves, there was another debate on the nature of the Word that is relevant to Browning's works.

Robert Browning's mother was brought up as a Puritan, and Browning may have known the debate on the subject from books given to him by her, or from his wide general knowledge of religious matters. In his book on the Puritans' language and literature, Nigel Smith summarises the Puritan debate on the nature of the Word and its origins:

Presbyterian

One of the most central metaphysical concerns for puritans if not for Christian Theology generally was the logocentric nature of God, creation, and the divine intervention...Most Puritans accepted this, together with the notion that the Word had been transmitted down to them through history as the transcendent manifestation of the divine. Where they parted company was over the definition of the Word; how did God's Word communicate with humanity? In which human faculty was the Word perceived? More orthodox Puritans accepted that the Word was encapsulated within the Bible entirely, whereas radical Puritans and sectarians were more prone to accept the transmission of the Word through dreams and visions as an equal or superior authority to the Bible⁶.

⁶Smith, 268-269.

Some of Browning's works are concerned with the unavailability of the transcendent Word and with the mockery of failed attempts to retrieve it. However, in other works, the transcendent Word does reappear, not in "dreams and visions", but rather in poetry. The poems which deal with his issue most directly are "A Death in the Desert" and *The Ring and the Book*, while many other poems relate to the subject without it being their major concern.

In "A Death in the Desert", the subject of the Word's power and its transmission is at the centre of this long poem. The problematic nature of human language in contrast to the Word is embedded in the poem's form. The poem is a construct of many layers of different languages and narrators: the first is Xanthus's nephew, the second is supposed to be Pamphylax, although this claim is undermined within the poem, the third John, and the central speaker is Jesus himself. At the end of the poem, Cerinthus speaks, and the last sentence is spoken either by Browning or by an additional unknown reader of the parchment. The different languages are English, Greek and Hebrew, and the 'translation' of the original Hebrew to the Greek of the parchment and of the parchment to English is unmentioned, though dealt with indirectly in the passages spoken by John on the transmission of the Word. In addition to the abundance of narrators, there is an intended obscurity around the identity of the author of the 'parchment' itself. Although the first narrator, whose initials are *Mu* and *Epsilon*, attributes the parchment to Pamphylax, the following lines cast doubt on his claim:

By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.

Valens is lost, I know not of his trace;

The Bactrian was but a wild childish man,

And could not write or speak, but only loved:

So, lest the memory of this go quite,

Seeing that I tomorrow fight the beasts,

I tell the same to Phoebas, whom believe!

(647-653)

Thus, this unknown "Phoebas" might be the 'real' author of the parchment, and Browning adds these lines so as to increase the uncertainty concerning the already dubious source. What is behind Browning's insistence on this incertitude? The problem most critics have had to deal with is how the insistence on the truth validity of the content in spite of the dubious authority agrees with Browning's aversion to the higher critics. The higher critics' claim concerning the fourth Gospel is that it is not originally by John, but rather by someone wishing to grant Jesus' authority to his own compositions. In 1863, Browning read Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus*, which contains the following argument:

I dare not be certain that the fourth gospel was written entirely by the pen of an ex-fisherman of Galilee. But that in substance, this gospel issued towards the end of the first century, from the great school of Asia Minor, which held to John....is

demonstrated, both by external evidence and by the examination of the document itself, in a manner that leaves nothing to be desired. A circumstance, moreover, which fully proves that the discourses reported by the fourth gospel are not historic, but compositions intended to cover with the authority of Jesus, certain doctrines dear to the compiler⁷

DeVane's claim that Browning wrote the poem so as "to strike a blow for the personality of the beloved disciple, and for the authenticity of the Gospel" does not agree with Browning's choice of form, and the clear disregard for historical evidence. William Whitla is also confused over the poem's form: "If truth is the ultimate concern of the poem...then the poem's structure is not wholly devoted to that concern"⁸. Others have come up with different solutions to the problem. E.S. Shaffer, for one, takes the opposite claim in his *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem*, namely, that Browning actually follows the arguments of the higher critics to construct "A Death in the Desert", and the result is a poem which supports the basic claims of the higher critics concerning the lack of historical evidence for the Christian story⁹.

⁷ From Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*, translated by C. E. Wilbour, New York 1866, p.25 & 29. Quotation from DeVane's *Handbook*, p.296.

⁸ William Whitla, *The Central Truth: The Incarnation in Robert Browning's Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), p.37.

⁹ E. M. Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature: 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.207.

William Gruber claims that “Browning, in seeming to subvert the historical reliability of his parchment, and in making John less ‘realistic’, by some strange paradox authenticates them both...thus myth is not subject to historical criticism”¹⁰. For Joseph Dupras, “A Death in the Desert” as well as “An Epistle...of Karshish” and “Cleon”, “Christianity appears not just a religious and cultural phenomenon, but a changing philological and interpretive one”, and both poems show that “[an] extant text, whether scriptural or poetic, only invites repeated analysis”¹¹. Most critics now seem to agree that what Browning seems to be saying is that in spite of the intended dubious authority and lack of historical evidence, the statements within the poem are true, because they have a higher validity¹².

Lin

I will be reading the poem as a lament over the loss of the immediate power of the Word of ancient times, and a study of its replacement.

Browning presents the modern word in all its brittleness, exposes all he regards as its weaknesses, reaffirms Christianity in spite of all this, but most of all, divulges his own craving for a less brittle ‘word’, and his desire for the certainty of the Word.

The subject of the unavailability of the original Word is presented in the

¹⁰ William Gruber, “Temporal Perspectives in Robert Browning’s ‘A Death in the Desert’”, *VP* 17 (1979), p.340.

¹¹ Joseph A. Dupras’s “The Word’s Dispersion: Two Letters and a Parchment in Browning’s Poetry”, *SBHC* 18 (1990), p.95-111, (p.95, 105).

¹² For example, see David Shaw’s *The Dialectical Temper*, p.185, and Virginia Hyde’s “The Fallible Parchment”, *VP* 12:2 (1974), p. 125-135, (p. 134).

first line of the poem: "Supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene". The first word of the poem is "supposed", a word which introduces the general uncertainty concerning the identification of speakers, later to be contrasted with the certitude concerning the identity of the speaker of the Word. The whole poem is a subtle and elaborate comparison between the characteristics of the Christian Word and the modern word, that is, the word of the poem itself. The poem is an attempt to deal with the feeling of inferiority and frustration concerning the modern poetic word. The poem deals with the subject of the status of the Word in modernity both in terms of content and of form.

The bracketed passage beginning the poem is meant to attribute power and authenticity to the centre poem, that is, the parchment. The images describing the parchment are grossly tangible: it has "three skins glued together", "[S]tained and conserved with the juice of terebinth" and "[c]overed with cloth of hair" (3,6,7). The shape and look of the parchment is contrasted with its content: its physicality, like its dependence on human testimony, does not decrease what Browning grasps as its inherent truth. These images also emphasise the fragility of the written word: it can be decomposed or burnt, it contains truth but it is still only matter. Contrasted with it is the powerful inspired utterance - or in other words, the Word. The Word is the main subject of the poem, and there are many references to it within the poem, but only one example of the miraculous power of the spoken Word. In this case, the Word is spoken by the "Boy", whose real name and identity remains unknown

throughout the poem. He is never properly introduced, and in lines 647-653 the narrator traces the fate of those present at John's death, but fails to mention "the Boy". The "Boy" serves as a vehicle to deliver the Word and revive John:

Then the Boy sprang up from his knees, and ran,
 Stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,
 And fetched the seventh plate of graven lead
 Out of the secret chamber, found a place,
 Pressing with finger on the deeper dints,
 And spoke, as 'twere his mouth proclaiming first,
 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'

Whereat he opened his eyes wide at once,
 And sat up of himself, and looked at us;
 And thenceforth nobody pronounced a word:
 Only, outside, the Bactrian cried his cry
 Like the lone desert-bird that wears the ruff,
 As signal we were safe, from time to time.

(58-70)

The powerful utterance, spoken as if for the first time, brings John back to life, and is followed by the voice of the Bactrian simulating a bird, signaling safety. The emphasis here is on the human voice and its power to copy nature and to transcend it. The resurrecting force of the boy's

utterance is due both to his own immersion in the utterance, mouthing it as if for the first time, and for the force given to it by the “seventh plate” of the “secret chamber”, the written Word itself. The powerful utterance, which constitutes a miracle, is a product of both the actual written Word and the speaker’s characteristics. This act of resurrection is actually the only instance of the effect of the Word within the poem, though there are many arguments and memories that refer to the Word in John’s monologue. The boy’s resurrection of John is like Browning’s own resurrection of John in the poem, and we are reminded of *The Ring and the Book* where “Man” “[C]reates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps” (I, 712, 719).

Why did the mage say, - feeling as we are wont
 For truth, and stopping midway short of truth,
 And resting on a lie, - ‘I raise a ghost?’
 ‘Because’, he taught adepts, ‘man makes not man.
 Yet by a special gift, an art of arts,
 More insight and more oversight and much more
 Will to use both of these than boast my mates,
 I can detach from me, commission forth
 Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage
 O’er old unwandered waste ways of the world,
 May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
 Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
 Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein

I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
 Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
 (By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
 What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
 Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust's!
 Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was not Elisha once? -
 Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.
 There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
 Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
 And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up
 And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
 And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
 Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
 And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm:
 And he returned, walked to and fro the house,
 And went up, stretched him on the flesh again,
 And the eyes opened. 'Tis a credible feat
 With the right man and way.
 (I, 742-772)

This instance of the power of the Word, uttered by one who is in the right state of mind, is actually recreated in the poem, in John's monologue. Browning attempts to recreate the Word, granting it his own meaning, which he puts in John's mouth. The poem attempts to be a resurrection of John, and an appendix to the fourth gospel. Seen in this light, the form

serves to blur this pretense to recreate the Word; it clouds the pretense to the Word by misleading the reader as to the authority and identity of the speaker. Thus, the confusion created by Browning around the identity of the shifting narrators in the poem serves as an apology, as well as a theological statement on the status of the Word in modern times.

The second reference to the Word is within John's actual argument, constituting the main subject of the poem.

What if the truth broke on me from above
 As once and oft-times? Such might hap again:
 Doubtlessly He might stand in presence here,
 With head wool-white, eyes flame, and feet like brass,
 The sword and the seven stars, as I have seen -
 I who now shudder only and surmise
 "How did your brother bear that sight and live?"
 'If I live yet, it is for good, more love
 Through me to men: be naught but ashes here
 That keep awhile my semblance, who was John, -
 Still, when they scatter, there is left on earth
 No one alive who knew (consider this!)
 - Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
 That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
 How will it be when none more saith "I saw"?

(119-133)

John wonders whether he will experience revelation, and whether his words will be true and sanctified by God as they have been in the past.

The irony here is that Browning eventually determines that the monologue is 'true', for it contains a true vision of the future. Then the problem of the Word is brought up, and its gist is, what will be the effect of the disappearance of the Word from the world? The question is filled with anxiety, and places the poem itself in an era preceding this void - and thus in an era when the Word still exists and its powers are still extant. The reviving utterance of the boy in the beginning of the poem also reminds us that the 'parchment' is placed in a reality where language acts according to rules different from the ones we know today.

Browning answers the different claims using John's voice and authority. His answer to the questioning of the truth of the Fourth Gospel is that it was given by God:

Afterward came the message to myself
 In Patmos isle; I was not bidden teach,
 But simply listen, take a book and write,
 Nor set down other than the given word
 With nothing left to my arbitrament
 To choose or change: I wrote and men believed.
 Then, for my time grew brief, no message more,
 No call to write again...

(139-146)

In his retelling of the past the importance of the written word is immense, even though its instantaneous power is diminished. It cannot cure - it has no miraculous power - it is subject to and dependent on the laws of nature, unlike the spoken Word, yet it is the only vestige of the Word we have in modernity. In answer to the question, why has God let the power of the Word diminish, John replies that "To test man, the proofs shift"

(295). He describes the dwindling of the power of the Word:

Well, was truth safe for ever, then? Not so.

Already had begun the silent work

Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,

Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt.

(318-321)

Browning phrases the modern wish for the return of the powerful spoken

Word:

I cry now, "Urgest thou, *for I am shrewd*

And smile at stories of how John's word could cure -

Repeat that miracle and take my faith?"

I say, that miracle was duly wrought

When, save for it, no faith was possible.

(461-465)

In spite of the great appreciation for the inherently inferior written **Word**,
 manifested in this poem as well as in “Fust and his Friends” of the
Parleyings, the disappearance of the spoken Word and its power to
 create, to cure, and to revive, is still grieved over. This sorrow is
 expressed in the repeated image of the “mouth” in “A Death in the
 Desert”. Firstly, the opening sentence of the centre poem, i.e., the
 ‘parchment’, contains an image of John’s mouth:

(l.c.)

I said, ‘If one should wet his lips with wine,

....

He is not so far gone but he might speak.’

(13, 20)

Following the frame poem that accentuates the fragility of the written
 word and the problem of authority that is inherent to it, the centre poem
 commences with an anticipation for an utterance. The motif of the
 “mouth” continues a few lines later in a further description of John:

For certain smiles began about his mouth,

And his lids moved, presageful of the end.

Beyond, and half way up the mouth o’ the cave,

The Bactrian convert...

(33-6)

When the boy's utterance revives John, the mouth is mentioned again, for he "spoke, as 'twere his mouth proclaiming first" (63). John characterises himself as one ~~X~~whom Christ's mouth taught" (135), and at the closing of the poem, the narrator, supposedly Pamphylax, remarks after John's death:

By this, the cave's mouth must be filled with sand.

(647)

The mouth is here a symbol of the spoken Word and its power: with John's death it is "filled with sand", that is, shut forever. "A Death in the Desert", therefore, refers to the death of the last person who spoke the Word with his own mouth - it is also the death of the spoken miraculous Word which Browning laments. The importance of the spoken word in this poem is also reflected in its location within the different layers of the poem. The poem itself is, obviously, written; the parchment embodies the written word; but as we move further back into the past, the spoken Word becomes more dominant, whether it is John's spoken monologue, his word which "could cure", Christ's utterances, and finally, God's "Word of Life".

In accordance with the linguistic manifestations which grow in importance as we delve deeper into the layered structure of the poem, so do the different sub-languages of the poem. We are asked to make believe that

“
”

the parchment is in Greek, and we are led to infer that the bracketed introduction and afterward are also in Greek. Nevertheless, John's 'original' monologue must be in Aramaic¹³, as well as Jesus' Word. The subject of translation with regard to John is also brought up in Renan's *The Life of Jesus*, where Renan claims that one of the reasons that the fourth gospel could not have possibly been written by John is that John the Galilee fisherman, who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, could not have possibly written such a complex and abstract Greek text. Browning must have known that Jesus and his contemporaries did not use Greek as their everyday language, and thus Browning's poem contains three ulterior pseudo-translations: from the original Aramaic to the Greek of the parchment, and from Greek to Browning's English. This complex structure of the poem places spoken Aramaic or Hebrew as the 'original' Word and the most powerful, containing truth in its "absolute blaze" (320). Next in importance and power is the written Greek of the parchment and of the Gospel, and the outer layer belongs to Browning's poetic English. The decrease in the power of the word in its movement from the original language, Hebrew, to Greek and then to English, is clear in spite of the invisibility of the 'translations' within the poem. It is clear especially in contrast with the original Aramaic or Hebrew which could revive and cure. In spite of this inferiority of the poem to the original utterances, Browning's ultimate message in the poem disagrees with the form which accentuates the weaknesses of modern language in terms of immediate power and claims to authority. The poem is, after all, an

¹³ A form of Hebrew which was the vernacular in Palestine during the time of Jesus.

appendix to the scripture, and by writing in John's name Browning is implying that revelation is still extant in poetic form. Thus, the dramatic monologue attempts to fill the gap created by the disappearance of the Word. The poem is in many ways in better position to contain the truth than the 'parchment', if one actually existed. The references to the parchment contain a pretense to historical truth, and one which can never be proved with all certainty. The poem, on the other hand, containing no such claim, is for Browning just as good a tool if not a better one for conveying what he regards as his own private revelation.

"A Death in the Desert" is certainly Browning's clearest endeavour to simulate the Word, though in "An Epistle...of Karshish" in *Men and Women*, there are four lines in quotation marks which the narrator attributes to Jesus. The problematic nature of these "quotations" must have been apparent to Browning, though he in no way shuns didactic claims to authority, in these poems and especially in the later *Ferishtah's Fancies*. In *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* there are two important references to the subject of the Word in modernity. The first is in "Parleying with Christopher Smart" where Browning's comments on Smart's "Song to David" reveal his own views on truth and poetic language.

...Such success

Befell Smart only out of throngs between

Milton and Keats that donned the singing-dress -
 Smart, solely of such songmen, pierced the screen
 'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul, -
 Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
 Live from the censer - shapely or uncouth,
 Fire-suffused through and through, one blaze of truth
 Undeafened by a lie, - (you have my mind)-
 For, think! this blaze outleapt with black behind
 And blank before, when Hayley and the rest...
 (110-120)

This "blaze of truth" is referred to in "A Death in the Desert" as
 something lost forever:

Already had begun the silent work
 Whereby truth, deadened of its absolute blaze,
 Might need love's eye to pierce the o'erstretched doubt.
 (319-321)

Once the Word has disappeared, truth is no longer a 'blaze', skepticism
 emerges, and language loses the capability to contain unquestionable
 truth. Yet in "With Christopher Smart" Browning names an exception:
 Smart's "Song to David". In this poem Browning feels that Smart
 "pierced the screen/ 'Twixt thing and word", and thus the word merges
 with the object it denotes, and the result is plain truth. Having these lines

in mind, one can try and extrapolate Browning's ideas on the truth value of language. Considering his statement at the closing of *The Ring and the Book*, that "human speech is naught/ Our human testimony false," and that "Art remains the one way possible/ Of speaking truth" (XII 834-5,839), Browning's explanation for the weakness of language in "With Christopher Smart" is in the schism between word and thing, that is, the arbitrariness of language and its disconnection from what Browning termed 'nature'.

Was it that when, by rarest chance, there fell
 Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
 Naked...
 ("With Christopher Smart", 140-2)

Browning's idea of language with the 'blaze of truth' is of a language in which there is a perceivable connection between the word and what it denotes. Paracelsus and Agrippa, as well as other Renaissance magicians, propound these ideas which originate from the kabbala. Smart, whose "Song to David" was also influenced by such ideas, tried to achieve such language in his poem. In the *Parleyings* Browning does not seem to attempt to achieve such transcendent poetic language as he does in "A Death in the Desert", but the long poem closing the collection, "Fust and his Friends", is a direct statement on the evolution of the Word from the time of Jesus to modernity.

“Fust and his Friends” is placed on the day on which the first dated book, a Psalter, was printed. The poem is based on an historical error which identifies Johann Fust (1400-1466) with Johann Faust, and accordingly Browning merges the two figures, the printer and the magus, in order to make a statement on both the Word and magic, despite his awareness of the historical error:

So it happed with John Faust; lest John Fust fare the same, -

(29)

Thus, the poem is also a statement on the historical mistake, on the prejudice that was the cause of the erroneous merger of the two figures. The poem begins with a characterisation of Fust as a black magician by the seven “friends”, who embody that prejudice. They have come to accuse Fust of dealing with the devil, and they turn to religious language as a source of power in order to threaten and intimidate Fust:

Look up, I adjure thee by God’s holy name!

For neighbours and friends - no foul hell-brood flock we!

Saith Solomon ‘Words of the wise are as goads’:

Ours prick but to startle from torpor, set free

Soul and sense from death’s drowse.

(30-34)

Yet the weakness of their words and their pompous and ineffectual language is mocked by both Browning and Fust:

Childhood so talks.

Not rare wit not ripe age - ye boast them, my neighbours! –

(45-46)

Fust remains unmoved by their threats. When they attempt to use a psalm as a magic potent meant to compel Fust to admit he signed a pact with the devil, the result is a mockery of the pretense to powerful language, such as Browning himself often essays.

SECOND FRIEND

Exorcise!

SEVENTH FRIEND

Nay, first - is there any remembers

In substance that potent '*Ne pulvis*' - a psalm

Whereof some live spark haply lurks 'mid the embers

Which choke in my brain. Talk of 'Gilead and balm'?

I mind me, sung half through, this gave such a qualm

To Asmodeus inside of a Hussite, that, queasy,

He broke forth in brimstone with curses. I'm strong

In - at least the commencement: the rest should go easy,

Friends helping. 'Ne pulvis et ignis'...

SIXTH FRIEND

All wrong!

(161-169)

The 'miracle' of powerful language fails to occur, and to replace it emerges a new kind of 'magic' - the magic of the press. Fust retells the creation of the press:

...Creation

Revealed me no object, from insect to Man,

But bore thy hand's impress: earth glowed with salvation:

'Hast sinned? Be thou saved, Fust! Continue my plan,

Who spake and earth was: with my word things began.

'As sound so went forth, to the sight be extended

Word's mission henceforward! The task I assign,

Embrace - thy allegiance to evil is ended!

Have cheer, soul impregnate with purpose! Combine

Soul and body, give birth to my concept - called thine!

'Far and wide, North and South, East and West, have dominion

O'er thought, wingèd wonder, O Word! Traverse world

In sun-flash and sphere-song! Each beat of thy pinion

Bursts night, beckons day: once Truth's banner unfurled,
Where's falsehood? Sun-smitten, to nothingness hurled!

(281-295)

The power of the spoken Word as we have seen it in "A Death in the Desert" is gone: it cannot be revived, and all we are left with are copies of the Word of the Bible.

In one of the very few close readings of the poem, Blair Ross reads Fust in the context of Renaissance neo-platonism, claiming that Fust is a typical Magus - combining the spiritual and the physical in order to create and be nearer to God¹⁴. Both Fust and Paracelsus are said to be a Renaissance version of the Magus: they aspire to use the material world to further the spiritual evolution of mankind.

These stanzas relate this poem to "A Death in the Desert" with their allusions to the fourth Gospel, to "In the beginning was the Word", and the dialectic of light and darkness in the fourth Gospel and in John's epistles:

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not¹⁵.

¹⁴ Ross Blair, "Magic and the Magus in Browning's *Paracelsus* and 'Fust and his Friends'." *SBHC* 16 (1988), p.86-104.

¹⁵ *John* I, 4-5.

Fust sees himself as a messenger of the Word, one who brings light into darkness, like John. The press is said to be part of God's "plan", and Fust is said to continue it. In "A Death in the Desert", written 23 years before "Fust and his Friends", Browning puts forward the same idea:

Will you renounce this pact of creatureship?
 The pattern on the Mount subsists no more,
 Seemed awhile, then returned to Nothingness;
 But copies, Moses strove to make thereby,
 Serve still and are replaced as time requires:
 By these, make newest vessels, reach the type!
 (624-9)

Browning is trying to attribute power and providence to the press, which is certainly one of the central manifestations of the demotion of language in modernity. It is one of the main reasons why words lost their mystic appeal: they became so easy to obtain, the modern person is inundated by them, and the sense of awe felt towards a written text in the Middle Ages has disappeared. Browning is trying to retain the magic attributed to the word in antiquity by making the press a part of the divine plan, and by ascribing mystic powers it:

...see this Engine - be witness

Yourselves of its working! Nay, handle my Types!

Each block bears a Letter: in order and fitness

I range them.

(271-274)

Fust becomes a semi-god or an Adam, ranging blocks of letters in order and fitness. This may also be an allusion to the kabbalistic idea that God created the world by arranging the twenty two Hebrew letters.

Browning's use of magic as a metaphor is problematic - as in *Pauline* magic is both repudiated and admired. Browning and Fust mock the primitive fear of magic expressed by the seven friends, yet ultimately, the references to magic grant Fust and his machine supernatural power. As in *Paracelsus*, magic and religion both aspire to absolute knowledge, yet one is blasphemous, and the other strives for truth under God's oversight.

Fust merges both these tendencies. He gains power over the dispersion of the Word, and thus gains superhuman powers:

... 'For,' cried I, 'what hinders

That graving turns Printing? Stamp one word - not one

But fifty such, phoenix-like, spring from death's cinders, -

Since death is word's doom, clerics hide from the sun

As some churl closets up this rare chalice.' Go, run

Thy race now, Fust's child! High, O Printing, and holy

Thy mission! These types, see, I chop and 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!
 (351-360)

Fust speaks like a magician: the press is “Fust’s child”, he can “chop and change” the Types, and using the machine he can overcome “death’s cinders” and gain the ultimate power of resuscitation. This monologue celebrates Fust’s power as an individual, and is therefore more the magician’s than the believer’s.

Give chase, soul! Be sure each new capture consigned
 To my Types will go forth to the world, like God’s bread
 - Miraculous food not for body but mind,
 Truth’s manna!
 (436-9)

Here again the Types are “*my* Types” which are only “*like* God’s bread” because they are not God’s but Fust’s (my emphasis). These claims are in conflict with the other statements in the poem which place God as the authority behind the press:

...no star bursts heaven’s dome
 But Thy finger impels it, no weed peeps audacious
 Earth’s clay-floor from out, but Thy finger makes room
 For one world’s-want the more in Thy Cosmos: presume

Shall Man, Microcosmos, to claim the conception
 Of grandeur, of beauty, in thought, word or deed?
 I toiled, but Thy light on my dubious step shone:
 If I reach the glad goal, is it I who succeed
 Who stumbled at starting tripped up by a reed,

Or Thou?

(377-386)

This is ultimately a question of authority and creativity, issues so important to Browning's thought. Browning's answer to the question is that both God and man are authors:

No, Man's the prerogative - knowledge once gained -
 To ignore, - find new knowledge to press for, to swerve
 In pursuit of, no, not for a moment: attained -
 Why, onward through ignorance! Dare and deserve!
 As still to its asymptote speedeth the curve,

So approximates Man - Thee, who, reachable not,
 Hast formed him to yearningly follow Thy whole
 Sole and single omniscience!

(421-428)

Thus the creation is both man's and God's. For Browning, man was formed by God with a tendency to always reach for more knowledge, and thus man truly creates, but without blasphemy, because his creation is part of God's plan. This may explain what might be seen as presumptuous in Browning's attempt to create an 'appendix' to the Fourth Gospel in "A Death in the Desert".

The conclusion of "Fust and his Friends" is a blatant anti-climax which threatens to undermine the former celebration of the press and God's approval of it.

I hailed Word's dispersion: could heartleaps but tarry!

Through me does Print furnish Truth wings? The same aids
Cause Falsehood to range just as widely...

...

...Printed leasing and lies

May speed to the world's farthest corner - gross fable

No less than pure fact - to impede, neutralize,

Abolish God's gift and Man's gain!

(448-455)

The poem ends with a note of uncertainty: is the Press good or bad, sanctioned by God or not? This is Browning's doubt reflected in Fust's: like Fust, he dares to claim that his words are a revelation of truth, and

even to simulate the Word. Like Fust, there is some doubt as to whether his words are devout or blasphemous.

In “Book X: The Pope” of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning returns to the issue of the status of the Word, and those who claim authority over it. The Pope, like Fust, is one whose connection to the Word is tighter than for others. Like Fust, he has limited control over it, and some doubt concerning its authority and truth value¹⁶. The Pope’s ideas on language are similar to the ones brought forth by Browning in Book XII.

None of this vile way by the barren words
Which, more than any deed, characterize
Man as made subject to a curse: no speech -
That still bursts o’er some lie which lurks inside,
As the split skin across the coppery snake,
And most denotes man!
(X, 348-353)

The ‘curse’ is the curse of “barren words”: language that always covers a lie. Lying, says the Pope, is inherent to speech:

But when man walks the garden of this world
For his own solace, and, unchecked by law,
Speaks or keeps silence as himself sees fit,

¹⁶ Book X, 162-168.

Without the least incumbency to lie,
 - Why, can he tell you what a rose is like,
 Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false
 Though truth serve better? Man must tell his mate
 Of you, me and himself, knowing he lies,
 Knowing his fellow knows the same, - will think
 'He lies, it is the method of a man!'
 And yet will speak for answer 'It is truth'
 To him who shall rejoin 'Again a lie!'
 Therefore this filthy rags of speech, this coil
 Of statement, comment, query and response,
 Tatters all too contaminate for use,
 Have no renewing: He, the Truth, is, too,
 The Word. We men, in our degree, may know
 There, simply, instantaneously, as here
 After long time and amid many lies,
 Whatever we dare think we know indeed
 - That I am I, as He is He, - what else?
 But be man's method for man's life at least!
 (360-381)

Human speech is "[t]atters all too contaminate for use": only the Word is
 absolute truth, and so is Jesus. But since the Pope is supposed to speak
 for Jesus, what is the value of his word? These characteristics of language
 affect the human claim to knowledge: all we "dare think we know" are

simple denotations such as “I am I” and “He is He”, and we must content ourselves with that. The Pope’s epistemological and linguistic stand implies that there is never a certainty concerning human speech, nevertheless, he dares take a chance “whatever proves the peril of mistake” (1251). Like Browning, he dares make a claim to truth, knowing that the language he must use is mere “tatters”. The Pope repeats his ideas on language in the famous passage on the convex glass where human speech again fails to describe things absolute:

Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;
 Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense, -
 There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)
 In the absolute immensity...
 (1315-8)

Unlike in “With Christopher Smart”, there is no linguistic breakthrough, human language remains frail and with a brittle hold on truth. On the whole, the stand on language in *The Ring and the Book* is consistent and is summed up in the sentence from Book XII: “our human speech is naught”. The Pope does not experience a revelation of truth as Browning believes Smart did, and the rift between the Word and the word remains unbridgeable.

In summing up Browning’s different ideas on the Word, one can trace three major concerns. The first is for its truth-value and authority, the

second is the contrast between the written and the spoken Word, and the third is the question of the possibility of its reappearance in modern times.

As far as truth-value is concerned, the Word is necessarily true at all times, and contrasted with human speech which cannot avoid falsity.

Authority, on the other hand, is a more complex issue, and one that is mingled with the change from the ancient Word, which was primarily oral, to the evolution of the Word from then on, in what is primarily written form. For the spoken powerful Word there is no problem of authority: the speaker, whether it is God, Jesus, or the boy of "A Death in the Desert", is unquestionably the source of the powerful Word. Yet the complexities of the written Word render the problem of authority more serious, as is manifested in the form of "A Death in the Desert" and in "Fears and Scruples". Browning's last concern is for the possibility of revelation, and consequently, the recreation of the Word in modernity. In *The Ring and the Book* and "Fust and his Friends" the rift between the Word and human speech cannot be surmounted. Yet in *The Ring and the Book* poetry tries to resemble the Word for it is the only form of speech which can contain truth, and in "Fust and his Friends" the circulation of copies of the Word is a compensation for the loss of the spoken Word. However, in "With Christopher Smart", poetic language is allowed rare glimpses into supernatural realms, and in Smart's poem it is even supposed to unite with Adamic language. Browning's desire for supernatural language in his own poems is reflected in his irrational hope for such a revelation, and his sense of the inherent failure of such a desire is embodied in his theological stand on the eternal rift between Word and word.

The Language of the 'Other': Browning and the Primitive

The debate on the origin of language, the much disputed subject of evolution, and the study of "savage" and "primitive" cultures in the nineteenth century, are all reflected in Browning's poems and plays. The primitive, the savage, the Arab and the Jew in Browning's works all fall into the category of the 'other' in Victorian society. The theory of evolution, misread as a theory of social progress, provided the Victorians with a new set of tools with which to define the 'other'. Peter Bowler in his *The Invention of Progress* claims that most Victorian thinkers "sought reassurance through the belief that social evolution was moving in a purposeful direction... that current changes might be part of a meaningful historical pattern"¹. This Victorian trend altered Darwin's theory of evolution in order to make it "fit" this idea of progress, moreover, "[t]he advent of biological evolutionism allowed this progressive scheme to be extended even further back in time"². Modern savages, their religion, language, moral behavior, were a controversial topic in the Victorian period: did they reflect the European man's past, as those believing in "progress" would have it, were they degenerate cultures, or rather, kindred human beings, as John Stuart Mill, H. T. Buckle, and others believed.³

¹ Bowler contrasts this popular Victorian idea with more conservative Victorian thinkers who created a "vision of progress as a sequence of distinct episodes or cycles"(8). *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.3.

² Bowler, p.7. For a similar claim see Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), ch. 1, p.25-60.

³ See Bowler, p.31. Also Brian V. Street *The Savage in Literature* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 88-91.

But before we discuss Browning's savage and his language, I would like to present the subject of time and the primitive, which is to be explored here. At what point in time does Browning choose to place his "primitives"? Karshish is anchored in the first century; the Druses in the fifteenth; Ferishtah at some unknown ancient time, but with references to the Bible which connect him to the world of the Old Testament and thus to a more specific period; and Caliban is extracted from the Shakespearean context and placed beyond history, at some mythical time. Johannes Fabian, in his *Time and the Other*, has explored the study of the 'other' in anthropology, and discovered that the primitive 'other' is always placed in the past, never a contemporary. He refers to the nineteenth century application of the theory of evolution to the 'other':

By claiming to make sense of contemporary society in terms of evolutionary stages, the natural histories of evolutionism reintroduced a kind of specificity of time and place – in fact a history of retroactive salvation – that has its closest counterpart in the Christian-medieval vision contested by the Enlightenment. Anthropology contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise. It gave to politics and economics – both concerned with human Time – a firm belief in "natural," i.e., evolutionary Time. It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, others

downstream⁴.

Browning's 'other' is always placed in the past, whether it is the primitive 'other' or the idealized and romanticized 'other'. Marxist critics would say he places these in the past so as to evade contemporary conflicts. This is partly true: in *The Return of the Druses*, "Caliban upon Setebos" and "An Epistle... of Karshish" Browning deals with contemporary issues in an indirect way. Yet I would suggest that the 'other' is placed in the past also as a construction of Browning's scheme of progress.

Caliban is the embodiment of Browning's idea of the primitive, and he is the most "primitive" of Browning's "primitive" personas, placed in a relatively early stage on his evolutionary scale. After quite a leap upward appears the Arab in the form of the Druses, Luria and Karshish. In *The Return of the Druses* the Druses are passionate, irrational and hot-tempered, and even though the play is ultimately pro-nationalist and against oppression, it manifests the Victorian idea of the 'primitive'. "Luria" presents a more temperate Moor, who is nevertheless excessively naive and trusting, a characteristic attributed to "savages". In "An Epistle... of Karshish" Browning presents a moment of transition: Karshish, in spite of his learnedness and feelings of superiority is still the Other, an Arab, a magician, with 'primitive' religion, yet he encounters Christianity, which may help him to "develop". In spite of these obvious prejudices, Browning is

⁴ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 17.

exceptionally sympathetic towards his Others, trying to construct their personal point of view and abhorrent of oppression. The case of “Holy- Cross Day” is a typical one: sympathetic to the Jews and critical of their persecution yet adhering to his belief in the ultimate superiority of Christianity and in the Jews’ eventual conversion.⁵ In his late poems, Browning’s approach changes. His initial sympathy turns to respect, the “primitive” Other becomes idealized and is transformed into the Semite “wise man” in *Ferishtah’s Fancies*. Foreshadowed by Rabbi Ben Ezra and Luria’s character and his descriptions of the “East”, Browning presents Ferishtah as “nearer God”⁶ than Victorian society, and his apparent simplicity as a merit. Thus, Browning conceives two images of the “primitive”, either placed in an ‘early’ and unenlightened stage of development (Caliban, the Druses, Karshish), or as closer to God due to so called primitiveness and simplicity.

The subject of this chapter is the language of the “primitive” ‘other’. Having demonstrated Browning’s attraction to supernatural language, how is that attraction reconciled with the idea of evolution? Evolution obviously undermines the idea of a perfect God-given language, because it means that language developed naturally and gradually and its beginnings were lame and imperfect rather than perfect. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the idea of a God-given language becomes more far-fetched than ever. In addition, the status of magic

⁵ See chapter 4 and Barbara Melchiori, *Browning’s Poetry of Reticence* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), ch. V, p.90-113.

⁶ *Luria*, Act V.

language, Browning's other supernatural language, is debunked by the rising science of anthropology and the Victorian distortion of Darwin's theory of evolution. The Victorian idea of evolution presents the belief in magic as characteristic of the "infancy" of humanity, a primitive mode practised by savages. In his references to magic language Browning cannot ignore contemporary notions, i.e., that magic is a superseded, "primitive" mode in the "progress" of humanity.⁷

The debate on the origin of language, culminating in the eighteenth century yet continuing well into the nineteenth century, is a debate between those who still hold that God gave humanity a perfect language which has since deteriorated, and those who believe in the natural evolution of language yet disagree among themselves on how and why that evolution took place. Browning's views on the origin of language can be extracted from the poems and plays in which he included "primitives", by studying his construction of the language of the "primitive" 'other'.

Modern Western culture has entertained a divided idea of the savage. In his essay "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea", Hayden White explores this issue.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Wild Man has become endowed

⁷ Hegel claims this as early as in 1832 in his "Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion". A Victorian example is Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, 1871.

with two distinct personalities, each consonant with one of the possible attitudes men might assume with respect to society and nature. If one looked upon nature as a horrible world of struggle, as *animal* nature; and society as a condition... preferable to the natural state, then he would continue to view the Wild Man as the antitype of the *desirable humanity*, as a warning of what men would fall into if they definitively rejected society and its norms. If, on the other hand, one took his vision of nature from... what might be called *herbal* nature, and saw society, with all its struggle, as a fall away from natural perfection, then he might be inclined to populate that nature with wild men whose function was to serve as antitypes of *social* existence. The former attitude prevails in a tradition of thought that extends from Machiavelli... and Vico down to Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre. The latter attitude is represented by Locke and Spenser, Montesquieu and Rousseau, and has recent champions in Albert Camus and Claude Levi-Strauss⁸.

Shakespeare's as well as Browning's Calibans obviously belong to the negative view of the savage: Caliban is a far cry from the "noble savage" – he is cruel, envious, lacking respect for himself as well as for others. Luria is an example of one of Browning's noble savages, a victim of "civilized" society. These two

⁸ *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. by Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 3-38.

conceptions of the savage are accompanied by two conceptions of language.

Some, especially those who perceive the savage as “degraded”, view the language of savages as concrete and sensual, debased and incapable of abstractions. In 1855, Richard Trench maintained that the savage is

the remnant and ruin of a better and nobler past. Fearful indeed is the impress of degradation which is stamped on the language of the savage, more fearful perhaps even than that which is stamped upon his form.⁹

He gives an example of a tribe that has forgotten the word for God, and the idea of God along with it. Trench still believed that Adam named the beasts in Eden, and that language was given to man by God, through divine inspiration. Herder, one of the leading thinkers in the debate on the origin of language in the eighteenth century, believed that language has its origin in the “primitive sounds of natural organs” and envisaged primitive language as emotionally expressive:

These tones, these gestures, those simple movements of the melody, these sudden changes, this touching voice, and I know not how many other things. With children and primitive people, with women, and highly sensitive persons, with the sick, the lonely, the aggrieved, they are a thousand times more effective than truth herself would be

⁹ Richard Trench, *On the Study of Words: Lectures*, 6th ed (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1855), p.19.

if her soft fine voice were heard from heaven ¹⁰.

Herder agrees with Rousseau and Condillac that the sounds of language have their source in “our animal nature”. He believed language developed and became more abstract in time – primitive cultures speak primitive languages, abundant in animal gestures and lacking in “general ideas... obtained by abstraction” (151). The alleged inability of primitive people to form abstractions was common in thinkers writing on language in the eighteenth century.

Other voices in the debate, such as Rousseau’s, followed by Wordsworth’s, conceived language in the early stages of its development as poetic and musical. Rousseau believed that

languages were songlike and passionate before they were plain and methodical...At first men spoke only poetry; only much later did it occur to anyone to reason. ¹¹

Thus, the split perception of the savage continues into the realm of language, and Browning’s works reflect both these aspects. The language of Caliban, the Druses, and Karshish all contain some “primitive” characteristics, as theorists of

¹⁰ J.G Herder’s *Essay on the Origin of Language* in *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. and trans. by F. M. Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.121-122, 124. First published in 1770.

¹¹ J. J. Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. by Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.253.

language of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries imagined them. I am assuming that Browning was familiar with these general ideas on language, either from his study of languages at University College London, or from general reading.

I will begin my attempt to unravel Browning's ideas on the origin of language by studying his notion of evolution. In an 1881 letter to Furnivall, Browning retrospectively construes Part V of *Paracelsus* as an example of his belief in parts of the theory of evolution twenty-four years before the publication of Origin of the Species. Yet the conception of evolution which Browning seems to espouse in Paracelsus is a far cry from Darwin's idea of natural selection, it is rather a notion of eschatological progress planned by a "creative intelligence" in an "everlasting moment of creation".

In reality, all that seems *proved* in Darwin's scheme was a conception familiar to me from the beginning: see in *Paracelsus* the progressive development from senseless matter to organized, until man's appearance (*Part v.*). Also in *Cleon*, see the order of "life's mechanics,"-and I daresay in many passages of my poetry : for how can one look at Nature as a whole and doubt that, wherever there is a gap, a "link" must be "missing"-through the limited power and opportunity of the looker? But go back and back, as you please, *at the back*, as Mr. Sludge is made to insist, you find (*my faith is as*

constant) creative intelligence, acting as matter but not resulting from it. Once set the balls rolling, and ball may hit ball and send any number in any direction over the table; but I believe in the cue pushed by a hand¹².

The well-known passage in Paracelsus that Browning refers to also touches on another issue: the debate on the origin of language. Paracelsus describes humankind's "feverish starts" thus:

... O long ago
 The brow was twitch'd, the tremulous lids astir,
 The peaceful mouth disturb'd; half-uttered speech
 Ruffled the lip; and then the teeth were set,
 The breath drawn sharp, the strong right-hand clenched stronger -
 As it would pluck a lion by the jaw:
 The glorious creature laughed out even in sleep!
 (756-762)

In this metaphor, "half-utter'd speech" represents language in an early phase of Browning's idea of man's progress, before his embarking on "his long triumphant march" towards God (766). Thus, Browning seems to espouse the idea of the gradual development of language from the imperfect "half-utter'd speech" to a

¹² *Letters of Robert Browning Collected by Thomas J. Wise*, ed. by Thurman L. Hood (London: John Murray, 1933), p. 199-200.

more glorious language which must have accompanied man's "tendency to God" and ultimate perfection (773).

Georg Roppen explores the subject of evolution in Browning, as well as in other poets' works, in the *Oslo Studies in English* published in 1956. He concludes that "Browning reads into it [Darwinian theory] a form of teleology which Darwin himself had severely criticized" (113). The idea of evolution manifests itself in *Paracelsus* as

... a divine creative act, continuous and progressive... The evolutionary vision of the Drama conforms, in its vague descriptive outline, to the biological theory of 'Progression' as well as to transmutation, and emphasis is throughout on finalistic aspects and on the cause underlying the process. The process in nature is to him cumulative and organic, and man emerges as the last fruit of its slow, purposive growth. Underlying this intuition there is throughout a neo-platonic belief in God the maker of the world, whose joy and goodness permeate all being with an urge or nisus to perfection.¹³

Dorothy Mermin explored the same subject in her essay "Browning and the Primitive":

¹³ Georg Roppen, "Evolution and Poetic Belief" in *Oslo Studies in English 5* (Oslo and London: Oslo University Press and Basil Blackwell, 1956), p.122.

Browning's poems reflect the intellectual trend of these decades with great precision. He shared the common attitude of mixed horror, contempt, and fascination, and his poems presuppose the evolutionary view that became current in the seventies: that primitive peoples and barbaric myths represent early rather than degenerate stages in the cultural development of the human race, and furthermore that fragments of primitive thought and behavior survive in higher cultures – even in modern England.¹⁴

Thus, Browning's notion of evolution coincides with the popular Victorian interpretation of the theory according to which evolution is progress towards a prescribed goal as part of a divine scheme. In this he sides with thinkers who advocate the natural rather than the divine origin of language, yet believe that the development of language is part of God's plan of "progress". An early stage of language in this plan is most clearly presented by Caliban and in "The Return of the Druses", but also, I believe, characterises Karshish's speech in "An Epistle". Caliban represents the earliest stage in the development of language Browning chose to portray, followed by the Druses and Karshish. Luria presents a different case: his language does not contain "primitive" characteristics, and his faith and simplicity, like Ferishtah's, brings him closer to God and make him an example to Victorian society. *Luria* reveals Browning's assumption that in spite of his belief in the natural origin of language, the perfect divine language exists

¹⁴ *Victorian studies* 25:2 (1982), p.211-2.

simultaneously, in another realm, and one can attempt to translate it or, rarely, to catch glimpses of it. Ferishtah is the idealized 'other' who touches this realm of divine language.

In "Caliban Upon Setebos", published in 1864 in *Dramatis Personae*, Browning revives Shakespeare's Caliban, one of the rare examples in his work of the use of a literary rather than historical persona¹⁵. The character he adopts is one that has left a great impression on Western thought and merged with the idea of the savage. The Western idea of the savage plays an important role in this poem.

Even though in the play Caliban is the bastard of the witch Sycorax and of the devil, his character is taken from the storehouse of Western ideas on the wild man, and this is also the public idea of Caliban in the nineteenth century¹⁶.

Terrell L. Tebbetts illustrated how *Punch*, read by Browning while living in Italy, used the figure of Caliban together with gorillas, monkeys and Yahoos "to stereotype figures currently in its disfavor" in the years 1860-1864¹⁷. Indeed, a long line of critics has regarded Caliban as a primitive man with a primitive mind.¹⁸ Yet if Caliban is indeed a primitive man, the "missing link", why doesn't Browning use a cave man and place him in pre-history? Why does he use a literary character that can be situated on the evolutionary ladder only

¹⁵ Another example is Childe Roland, from Edgar's song in *King Lear*.

¹⁶ Caliban is relevant to the Victorian idea of the "missing link", as Gillian Beer demonstrates in "Forging the Missing Link: Interdisciplinary Stories", an inaugural lecture published by the Cambridge University Press, 1992.

¹⁷ Terrell L. Tebbetts, "The Question of Satire in 'Caliban upon Setebos'", *VP* 22:4 (1984), p.367.

¹⁸ For example, C. R. Tracy's "Caliban Upon Setebos", *Studies in Philology* 35 (1938), p.488, and DeVane's *A Browning Handbook*, p. 299.

metaphorically? It seems that Browning does not wish to be identified with Darwin's theory of evolution so blatantly. The choice of a fantastic figure such as Caliban places Browning's message beyond time, and not merely as a depiction of a specific stage in human development. Moreover, since the poem is also a satire of certain religious modes of thinking, Caliban is an appropriate choice that serves both ends, characterised as "primitive" as well as a popular satirical figure.

John Howard has referred the reader to a letter written by Browning, which corroborates the hypothesis that Browning meant Caliban to be an illustration of the mind in an early stage of the evolution of mankind.

For in the letter Browning calls Caliban a fool and a clown; he says that Caliban's conceptions are grotesque and impossible; and, most enlightening of all, he says, 'my Caliban indulges his fancies long before even that beginning' (meaning the beginning of the play). In this statement he thus indicates that he has created a character that represents something early and undeveloped, something which is far back in the evolutionary scale, something belonging to the swamp world¹⁹.

Moreover, if one reads the poems of *Dramatis Personae* in sequence, one sees

¹⁹ John Howard's "Caliban's Mind" in *Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Philip Drew (London: Methuen, 1966), p.226-7.

that the preceding poem, "A Death in the Desert" anticipates "Caliban upon Setebos" and corroborates John Howard's claim:

Man, therefore, thus conditioned, must expect
 He could not, what he knows now, know at first;
 What he considers that he knows today,
 Come but tomorrow, he will find misknown;
 Getting increase of knowledge, since he learns
 Because he lives, which is to be a man,
 Set to instruct himself by his past self:
 First, like the brute, obliged by facts to learn,
 Next, as man may, obliged by his own mind,
 Bent, habit, nature, knowledge turned to law.
 (595-604)

The "brute" is, of course, Caliban, and the phrase "obliged by facts" certainly suggests the fight for survival, and may also refer to the theory of evolution. According to these lines Caliban is expected to learn and develop, yet some critics have maintained that Caliban does not develop throughout the poem, that he is a static character, incapable of change. This may be true as far as the poem itself is concerned, but if we compare Shakespeare's Caliban with Browning's, we indeed notice Browning's idea of progress.

In *The Tempest* Caliban is originally speechless, and Prospero teaches him language. Consequently, language endows Caliban with self-consciousness.

Prospero. Abhorred slave,
 Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
 Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
 Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
 One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
 Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
 A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
 With words that made them known.

...

Caliban. You taught me language, and my profit on't
 Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
 For learning me your language!

(Act I Scene 2)

For Prospero language is essential for clear thought and self-knowledge, and Caliban finds both redundant. His linguistic errors reflect his barbarism and inferiority. Ian Smith has argued that in Shakespeare's plays:

...linguistic and cultural barbarism are coterminous... That is, in the economy of early modern racialism, to commit rhetorical errors is a

direct function of being an outsider whose very presence constitutes a transgression of social order²⁰.

In the play Caliban is all desire and chaos, and wishes to remain so. The language he speaks remains Prospero's, and the only joy he finds in it is the joy of cursing, or trying to impose calamities on others and exert power over them with speech. He is interested in language only as much as it can "do" things in terms of actual power. Nevertheless, Shakespeare shows another aspect of Caliban, one that Browning chose to develop. Caliban is a potential poet:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about my ears; and sometime voices,
 That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me; that when I wak'd
 I cried to dream again.
 (Act III Scene 2)

Here Caliban's vulgar and instrumental speech is momentarily superseded by a

²⁰ Ian Smith, "Barbarian Errors: Performing Race in Early Modern England", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49:2 (1998), p.168-9.

speculative and poetic language, foreshadowing his ultimate promise to “seek for grace”. In “Caliban upon Setebos” Caliban adheres to his love of cursing, yet language is used for something more than that: for religious speculation about Setebos and the Quiet. Browning emphasises the poetic and pensive aspect of Shakespeare’s Caliban, and the end product is an “evolved”, more developed Caliban. He enjoys speaking, especially to spite Prospero and Miranda:

Moreover Prosper and Miranda sleep
 In confidence he drudges at their task,
 And it is good to cheat the pair and gibe,
 Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech.]
 (20-23)

As in *The Return of the Druses*, the subject of the “savage” is mingled with that of oppressive power. In this case Prospero is the oppressor, the patron, and the “civilizer”. Browning evinces sympathy towards Caliban’s predicament as he does towards the Druses’. For Caliban, speech is power: it is a form of rebellion and self-assertion. Caliban envies Prospero’s magic language:

Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books
 Careless and lofty, lord now of the isle:
 Vexed, ’stitched a book of broad leaves, arrow-shaped,
 Wrote thereon, he knows what, prodigious words;

Has peeled a wand and called it by a name;
 ...
 Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,
 Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,
 And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge
 In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;
 A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.
 'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,
 Taketh his mirth with make-believes: so He.
 (150-169)

Browning, who was sensitive on the subject of cruelty to animals²¹, creates a parallel between Caliban's situation and the sea beast's, in an attempt to illustrate Caliban's own wretched state. Caliban's cruelty towards the sea beast is understandable and partly condoned because he himself is a victim and a slave. As in *The Return of the Druses*, oppression and enslavement propagate even more violence and cruelty. Oppression and language are once again interconnected. Prospero's language is knowledge, and this knowledge is power. Caliban craves Prospero's magic language so as to have power and knowledge, and to take "his mirth with make-believes". This takes us back to *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, or, more accurately, to Browning's own denied fantasies of being a magician/poet uttering spells/poems. Browning projects upon Caliban's

²¹See "Tray" of *Dramatic Idyls: First Series*, 1879.

“primitive” mind his suppressed idea of the poet, the poet whose poems are mere “make believes”, and who strives for power rather than for the communication of truth.

The frequent negation of the idea of the magician/poet who strives to be like a God in Browning’s poems and plays is suspicious. Browning attributes this desire to the primitive mind of Caliban, because it expresses Browning’s own denied wishes. This reading gives an ironic twist to Browning’s motto: “Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself”. The original relation from *Psalm 50* is between creator and “wicked” creature, but in the context of the poem it can be transferred to the poet and his “wicked” character. In his study of the changes made to the manuscript of the poem, John Woolford concludes that by the addition of apostrophes and square brackets to the first edition, Browning “completes his own detachment from Caliban’s stream of speech, and from Caliban”²². Read in this context, Browning is ridding himself of any similarity to his character, rejecting the possibility that this ‘other’ may represent an aspect of his own self.

Caliban, as the ‘other’ poet, is obviously a bad poet, as we see from his “song” in lines 276-8. He desires powerful magic language, but his language is its antithesis: unmusical, awkward, and ungrammatical, and his images range from

²² John Woolford, “Self-Consciousness and Self-Expression in Caliban and Browning” in *Robert Browning in Contexts*, ed. by John Woolford (Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 1998), p.97.

the unappealing to the disgusting. His language is the embodiment of Browning's idea of "primitive" language, inspired by the debate on the origin of language. Isobel Armstrong discusses Caliban's language in terms of the debate on the origin of language, and tries to determine whether it is an example of the original language or rather a degenerate and decayed language. She concludes that "The poem witholds an answer"²³.

The most prominent characteristic of Caliban's speech is of course his much-discussed use of the third person. There have been many interpretations of Browning's choice of the third person: Mrs. Orr sees it as a sign of childishness²⁴, others as a sign of his primitiveness, his lack of self awareness and undifferentiated identity²⁵. Browning uses the same technique in "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", as part of Sludge's negative characterization²⁶. John Woolford studies the use of the third person in "Caliban upon Setebos" in terms of the changes between the manuscript and the first edition. He concluded that Browning's alterations reveal a process in which Caliban differentiates himself

²³ Isobel Armstrong, "Browning's 'Caliban' and Primitive Language" in *Robert Browning in Contexts*, p. 80. Armstrong suggests that Caliban's language was influenced by the ideas on language in Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793).

²⁴ *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning* (London: George Bell, 1891), p.195.

²⁵ For example, see David W. Shaw's *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p.194. Another example is Robert Langbaum's "The Dramatic Element: Truth as Perspective" in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Philip Drew (London: Methuen, 1966), p.133.

²⁶ See lines 550, 574, 588, 611 for examples.

from Setebos and gains self-consciousness²⁷.

Another characteristic is the concreteness of his speech: its emphasis on the senses, especially the senses of touch, smell, and taste. The similes and metaphors are taken from the animal and plant world, and the sun and moon play an important role in his religious thinking, as they do in *The Return of the Druses*. As far as magic language is concerned, like Browning's other "primitives", Caliban attributes magic power to words : saying something might make it happen. Speech is dangerous and might have great powers:

Could He but know! And time to vex is now,

When talk is safer than in winter-time.

(18-19)

At the end of the poem, when he thinks Setebos is about to punish him, he says:

It was fool's play, this prattling!

(287)

His attitude towards speech is presented as part of a primitive mode of thinking, yet Caliban's desire for "prodigious words" is triggered by Prospero, and reminds us of Paracelsus and Pietro D' Abano, other Browning magicians.

²⁷ John Woolford, "Self-Consciousness and Self-Expression in Caliban and Browning", p. 96.

Prospero, the “father” who is the law and the seeker of justice, is absent from this poem. Replacing him is Browning himself, an ambivalent “father”, who takes the “wicked” Caliban under his wings. As Terrell L. Tebbets has put it:

Those who see no satire in the poem, perhaps, are responding to Browning’s fatherly sympathy. Those who see playfulness may be responding to the father’s love of his son and joy in his being. Those who see the satire may be responding to the father’s regret... Love and sympathy, pain and regret – here as in his other poems with “villains,” Browning leaves us with them all²⁸.

In *The Return of the Druses* Browning’s ideas on progress and evolution hinted at in *Paracelsus* are elaborated and presented in a less cryptic fashion. The “Tragedy” was published in 1843, as Part IV of *Bells and Pomegranates*. It was another failed attempt to succeed as a playwright, for, as Clyde Ryals explains in *The Life of Robert Browning*, he had been looking for a producer for his plays, and had failed to find one. Finally he realized that “his quest for fame in the theatre was chimerical”²⁹.

The Return of the Druses could well be influenced by stories of the seventeenth century Jewish “false Messiah”, Shabtai Zvi, who claimed to be mystically inspired by God to the tradition of the Kabbala, dared to utter the

²⁸ Terrell L. Tebbets, p.381.

²⁹Clyde L Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning*, p.66.

ineffable Name, and promised to return the diaspora Jews back to their homeland. Shabtai Zvi eventually converted to Islam, and caused a grave disappointment in the Jewish communities of Europe and Asia.

Browning describes *The Return of the Druses* as a play having as its subject “the most wild and passionate love, to contrast with [King Victor]” (66). He chooses an Other culture to enact that “wild and passionate” love, a love that is also vindictive and deadly, probably in the hope to make the play exotic and alluring. Elazar Barkan offers an additional explanation, referring to Victorian culture in general:

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...the discourse of sexuality, no less than the discourse of violence, enabled certain Victorians to differentiate and bolster the strictures of “civilized” morality by means of a primeval and savage Other, only to discover that Victorian morality had been subverted without recognition³⁰.

In spite of this attempt to incite curiosity, the response to the play was sweepingly critical. William Charles Macready, the most dominant theatrical personality of the English stage at the time, read it and wrote : “with deepest concern, I yield to the belief that he will never write again - to any purpose. I

³⁰ “Introduction” in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. by Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 15.

fear his intellect is not quite clear.” He found the play “mystical, strange and heavy”.³¹ In addition to the subject of the “primitive” Other, the play draws upon some of the subjects that recur in almost all of Browning’s early works: the power of magic and magic language, the belief in God and blasphemy.

In the play, Browning wishes to explore the “primitive” ‘other’, and as in the case of Caliban, he places the ‘other’ in the past so as to fit his idea of historical progress. The issues are nevertheless contemporary ones: the Druses are contemporaries and so is the European colonization of “primitive” countries. Internal British affairs such as the popularity of magicians and the Chartists’ riots in 1839 and 1842 are also reflected in the play.

The Return of the Druses is a skeptical and irreligious play. It is the opposite of “mystical”, as Macready termed it, it is rather a reduction of mysticism to an instrument of power. There is no supernatural in this play apart from the claims made by the different characters, especially Djabal and the Nuncio. The subject of magic is here intermingled with the subjects of “nationalism and oppression”, and his stand on these subjects is “liberally-minded”, pro-nationalist and abhorrent of oppression³². Browning evinces sympathy towards the oppressed Druses and their culture. Nevertheless, he presents them as “primitive”, and their language, especially their use of magic language, as constituting a “primitive”

³¹ Clyde Ryals, *The Life of Robert Browning*, p.66.

³² From Trevor Lloyd’s “Browning and Politics”, *Robert Browning*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), p.154-5.

stage in the evolution of language and religion.

The play begins with the Druses, as Browning wishes to acquaint us with their culture and language. They are introduced in all their ‘otherness’, as they enter in a passionate and violent fashion in accordance with the Victorian prejudice of the Arab as irrational and irascible.³³

Enter stealthily KARSHOOK, RAGHIB, AYOOB and other initiated Druses, each as he enters casting off a robe that conceals his distinctive black vest and white turban; then, as giving a loose to exultation, -

Karshish. The moon is carried off in purple fire:
Day breaks at last! Break glory, with the day,
On Djabal’s dread incarnate mystery
Now ready to resume its pristine shape
Of Hakeem, as the Khalif vanished erst
In what seemed death to uninstructed eyes,
On red Mokattam’s verge – our Founder’s flesh,
As he resumes our Founder’s function!

Raghib. – Death

Sweep to the Christian Prefect that enslaved

So long us sad Druse exiles o’er the sea!

³³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), especially chapter 1, section 1, “Knowing the Oriental”.

Ayoob. Most joy be thine, O Mother-Mount!

(Act I)

Browning inundates the spectator/reader with Arab names: Karshook, Raghib, Ayoob, Djabal, Hakeem, Khalif, and Mokattam, thus presenting the Druses in all their alienating “otherness”. What to Victorian ears is a cacophonous beginning to the play, is achieved with the sound of these throaty Arab names, and rich in alliteration (“Djabal’s dread”, “Founder’s flesh”, “Founder’s function”, “Mother-mount”) to create a “primitive” effect. The first part of the first scene, up to Khalil’s entrance, is entirely made up of exclamations. Thus, the language spoken by the Druses is characteristic of the eighteenth and nineteenth century popular notion of primitive language: it is passionate and replete with emotional gestures Condillac, Rousseau, and Herder would attribute to our “animal nature”, it is alliterative and throaty, and it draws upon the forces of nature (moon, fire, day, sea, mount, morning) for images, similes and metaphors. Thus Browning enlivens his conception of primitive language, and magic and mysticism appear to be two of the essential characteristics of this conception of language.

Magic in “The Return of the Druses” does not have the power it has in *Pauline* and in “Transcendentalism”/it most resembles the idea of debased magic in “Mr. Sludge, the ‘Medium’” – utterly impotent, ridiculous, and fraudulent. Djabal’s magic powers with which he persuades the Druses to believe in his metamorphosis into a God are mere tricks he learnt in Europe, and he himself

;

e.c.

confesses his absolute lack of magic powers (Act II). Yet in spite of this demystification of the Druse religion, Browning's attraction to this alien culture and his belief in its people's basic rights is apparent. What he believes to be the spurious nature of their religion is immaterial to Browning – he is hostile to the moral obligation the Christian oppressors feel they have toward such “primitive” tribes. Even Loys, the knight who is the only favourable Christian character in the play, believes he must “fight to death against the infidel”. Thus, the play is, among other things, a criticism of Victorian Imperialism. The Druse culture, just like Victorian culture, claims superiority over other cultures:

Karshook. 'Tis the Druse Nation, warders on our Mount
 Of the world's secret, since the birth of time,
 - No kindred slips, no offsets from thy stock,
 No spawn of Christians are we, Prefect, we
 Who rise...
 (Act I)

Following this exclamatory beginning the Druses begin to “tear down, and to dispute for, the decorations of the hall”, thus continuing their passionate behavior and deepening the spectator/reader's idea of their “primitiveness” and “otherness”. Yet this is only so as to partly dissipate that “otherness”, for we soon find out that their violence is understandable: it is in that same hall that Ayoob's son died, that Karshook's daughter was raped, and that the Prefect massacred all the Druse Sheikhs and enslaved the rest. Thus, Browning uses

dramatic means to debunk what might be his contemporary audience's prejudices in favour of the Christians and against the Druses. Throughout the play, Browning places the two cultures side by side as equal in importance, critical of the claims to religious supremacy and a monopoly to truth made by both the Druses and the Christians. Nevertheless, the Druse religion is emptied of meaning and depicted as false and groundless, whereas Christianity is not similarly dissected. Browning's attitude towards the Druses is like his attitude towards the Jews in "Holy-Cross Day": even though the poem is clearly against oppression and racism, it contains a devaluation of Judaism³⁴. In *The Return of the Druses* Browning's stand for the Druses' national rights appears side by side with the devaluation of the Druse religion and its portrayal as "primitive".

The clash between the two cultures is personified in the struggle between Djabal, the leader of the Druses, who claims to be the reincarnation of the god Hakeem, and Loys, the Christian knight and new Prefect of the island, with whom he grew up. Loys's task as a knight is to "fight to death against the Infidel," (Act I), and Djabal's to free his tribe and to seek revenge. Both try to transcend their own culture – Loys, deluded by the Druses' apparent conversion, wishes to become a Druse for the sake of his love for Anael and his friendship with Djabal- yet Djabal betrays his trust and Loys returns to the perception of the Arab as

³⁴See note 5.

enemy. John Woolford suggests the following:

The pattern here is of a protagonist who pretends to a God-given insight, and it runs from Djabal – who in *The Return of the Druses* pretends to be ‘God Hakeem’ – through Sludge to Disraeli, who in the parleying with Dodington is represented as a dark charlatan exploiting ‘Man’s despot, the supernatural’ by an adroit adjustment of words and actions to imply occult powers. Even Blougram cannot wholly refute the accusation of having manipulated a supernatural sanction in which he does not wholly believe.

This uneasy sense of fraud in the fiction-making process, a black magic of the imagination itself, must account for Browning’s preoccupation with *forgery*³⁵.

Djabal, the false wizard claiming to be a God, is indeed a story teller, as Loys presents him in Act I:

... Forget you, I’ve been friendly
 With Djabal long ere you or any Druse?
 - Enough of him at Rennes, I think, beneath
 The Duke my father’s roof! He’d tell by the hour,
 With fixed white eyes beneath his swarthy brow,

³⁵ John Woolford, “Sources and Resources in Browning’s Early Reading” in *Robert Browning*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong, p. 26.

Plausiblest stories...

Khalil. Stories, say you?

In Djabal's soliloquy, Browning characterises Djabal as a story teller once again.

His attempts to help his people are termed a "chant" or a "tale":

That a strong man should think himself a God!
 I – Hakeem? To have wandered through the world,
 Sown falsehood, and thence reaped now scorn, now faith,
 For my one chant with many a change, my tale
 Of outrage, and my prayer for vengeance – this
 Required, forsooth, no mere man's faculty,
 Nought less than Hakeem's? The persuading Loys
 To pass probation here; the getting access
 By Loys to the Prefect; worst of all,
 The gaining my tribe's confidence by Fraud
 That would disgrace the very Frank, - a few
 Of Europe's secrets which subdue the flame,
 The wave, - to ply a simple tribe with these,
 Took Hakeem?
 ...
 But now, because delusion mixed itself
 Insensibly with this career, all's changed!

Have I brought Venice to afford us convoy?

'True – but my jugglings wrought that!' Put I heart

Into our people where no heart lurked? – 'Ah,

'What cannot an impostor do!'

(Act II)

His “chant” and “tale” are merely a “delusion”: yet this delusion has changed reality and might possibly free the Druses from their Christian oppressors. The power of the “delusion” is maintained, yet so is its immorality. Djabal is the immoral, blasphemous story teller/poet, whom Browning rejects yet with whom he sympathizes. Djabal pretends to be a god not only in order to save his people, as DeVane would have it, but also because of his personal need for greatness, like another character of Browning's, Paracelsus³⁶. The subject of resurrection, a subject which appears in many of Browning's poems and which Browning uses as a metaphor for the writing of poetry in *The Ring and the Book*, figures in *The Return of the Druses*. Djabal, as Hakeem, claims to be able to resurrect – though, like the “magicians” Paracelsus and Karshish, he cannot, being an impostor (Act V). Thus Browning places Djabal together with Paracelsus and the speaker of *Pauline*, as emblems of the failed poet, who is an over-reacher, and does not understand that man “creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.”³⁷ It is not random that both Paracelsus and Djabal are characterized as magicians, and that in both cases their magic powers are delusory.

³⁶ DeVane, *Handbook* p.136.

³⁷ *The Ring and the Book*, “Book I”, line 719:

In *The Return of the Druses* the Nuncio presents the Victorian idea of progress that entails a condescending view of magic as inferior and primitive. The play's assumptions about magic are in the same spirit, for spells, charms, and other forms of magical language the Druses believe in, are presented as no more than illusions that weaken and mislead. The magic acts in the play are mere tricks, and Browning does not leave us in any doubt as to their impotence. Both the Nuncio and Anael present skeptic arguments:

Anael. Oh must I then – since Loys leaves us
 Never to come again, renew in me
 These doubts so near effaced already – must
 I need confess them now to Djabal? – own
 That when I saw that stranger, heard his voice,
 My faith fell, and the woeful thought flashed first
 That each effect of Djabal's presence, taken
 For proof of more than human attributes
 ...
 - That every such effect might have been wrought
 In other frames, tho' not in mine, by Loys
 Or any merely mortal presence?
 (Act II)

Both the Prefect and the Nuncio mockingly refer to the Druses as “Wizards”, and the Nuncio calls Djabal a “conjurer that peep’st and mutterest”, (Act III, Act IV). In spite of Browning’s sympathy for the Druses, the derision of magic expressed here is actually supported by the play’s assumptions. The Nuncio does not reject magic as satanic, as the speaker of *Pauline* does, he rather mocks it, thus depriving it of any power at all.

Nuncio.(Spells, children?

But hear how I dispose of all his spells!)

Thou art a prophet? – wouldst entice thy tribe

From me? – thou workest miracles? (Attend!

Let him but move me with his spells!)

(Act V)

Spells only frighten “children”, as they do Caliban. The belief in magic is projected upon a “primitive” culture, and Browning’s derision of Spiritualism and nineteenth century magicians is reflected in the Nuncio’s skeptic arguments. The Druse crowd is indeed childlike, credulous and aggressive. It speaks in the first person plural:

The uninitiated Druses, filling the hall tumultuously, and speaking together.

Here flock we, obeying the summons. Lo, Hakeem hath appeared,

and the Prefect is dead, and we return to Lebanon! My manufacture of goats' fleece must soon fall away there. Come, old Nassif - link thine arm in mine - we fight, if needs be. Come, what is the great fight word? - 'Lebanon?' (My daughter - my daughter!) - But is Khalil to have the office of Hamza? - Nay, rather, if he be wise, the monopoly of henna and cloves. Where is Hakeem? - The only prophet I ever saw, prophesied at Cairo once, in my youth : a little black Copht, dressed all in black too, with a great stripe of yellow cloth flapping down behind him like the back-fin of a water-serpent. Is this he? Biamrallah! Biamreh! HAKEEM!

(Act V)

The Druse crowd is emotional ("My daughter - my daughter!"), ready to fight, worried about subsistence, and enthusiastic about the coming exaltation. Their "primitive" nature is suggested by the simile of the water serpent, a simile that might as well have been uttered by Caliban. Throughout act V, both the Nuncio and Djabal try to persuade the crowd, which proves aggressive and dangerous, as well as easily swayed. The Nuncio persuades them that Djabal is false, and shortly afterwards Djabal convinces them of his own glory, only to see them persuaded again by the Nuncio...Browning grants the "primitive" crowd extremely threatening characteristics, yet his observations on "crowd psychology" certainly do not derive from studying Druse masses. He identifies what he conceives as the violence, childishness and credulity of British or other

European crowds with the savage 'other'. He was not the only Victorian to conceive of the crowd in that way. Robert Nye in his study of "Savage Crowds, Modernism, and Modern Politics" demonstrates that by the end of the nineteenth century, "crowd theorists" believed that

The sources of the crowd's energy are the unconscious and primitive elements of human nature that have survived the course of evolution, including humankind's most ancient memories and instincts³⁸.

Browning reflects the temptation to attribute the savagery of the crowd to the 'other', and the Victorian prejudices that produced these theories. His interest in the psychology of the crowd might have been triggered by the Chartists' riots of 1839 and 1842, just before the writing of the play. It may also have been suggested by the popularity of modern magicians with the crowd in that period, a phenomenon that Browning abhorred³⁹.

In Act V the clash between the Druse and the Christian cultures reaches its climax. The Nuncio tries to persuade the Druse crowd that their belief in magic is primitive and childlike:

Nuncio. Ye dare not.

³⁸ *Prehistories of the Future*, p.48.

³⁹ See *Magic, Pretended Miracles, and Remarkable Natural Phenomena* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1848), p. 10.

I stand here with my five-and-seventy years,
 The patriarch's power behind me, God's above.
 Those years have witnessed sin enough ; ere now
 Misguided men arose against their lords,
 And found excuse ; but ye, to be enslaved
 By sorceries, cheats – alas! The same tricks, tried
 On my poor children in this nook o' the earth,
 Could triumph, that have been successively
 Exploded, laughed to scorn, all nations through:
'Romaioi, Ioudaioite kai proselutoi,
'Cretes and Arabians' - you are duped the last.
 (Act V)

The quotation is an interesting one, for it is from the second chapter of The Acts
of the Apostles which deals with the gift of tongues. In Acts “strangers of
 Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians” are some of the groups
 witnessed the miracle and heard the apostles speak in their own language (*Acts*
 II, 10). This gift of tongues is a return to the time before the destruction of the
 tower of Babel, when one language, the original language, was spoken by all and
 understood by all. Djabal in Act IV mentions Babel:

Djabal. What if we reign together? - if we keep

Our secret for the Druses' good? – by means
 Of even their superstition, plant in them
 New life? I learn from Europe : all who seek
 Man's good must awe man, by such means as these.
 We two will be divine to them – we are!
 All great works in this world spring from the ruins
 Of greater projects – ever, on our earth,
 Babels men block out, Babylons they build.

The same chapter of *Acts* contains the different signs that are to accompany the coming of the Lord:

And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth
 beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke (Acts II, 19)

These are of course some of the signs that are supposed to accompany the God Hakeem's arrival, yet those that do appear are either magic tricks (fire and smoke) or unrelated and explainable (Anael's death). Thus, the reference to Acts II serves as a contrast as well as a comparison. The similarities as well as the differences between the Druse religion and Christianity are highlighted. Even though Djabal's claims and signs are false, human religious needs are ultimately the same. Browning puts in Djabal's mouth what seems like the play's message which is in the same spirit:

Djabal. I with my Arab instinct, thwarted ever
 By my Frank policy, - and with, in turn,
 My Frank brain, thwarted by my Arab heart -
 While these remained in equipoise, I lived
 - Nothing; had either been predominant,
 As a Frank schemer or an Arab mystic,
 I had been something; - now, each has destroyed
 The other – and behold, from out their crash,
 A third and better nature rises up -
 My mere man's-nature! And I yield to it:
 I love thee, I who did not love before!
 (Act V)

A message of love, in this case love beyond nationality, is typical of Browning, resembling the message of love at the end of “*Karshish*”. The message is inspired by Shelley, who called for a future without religion and without oppression⁴⁰. The play is a criticism of Imperialism and oppression, and a courageous attempt to dissipate Arab Otherness, while simultaneously adhering to that Otherness and to Victorian ideas of progress. For “instinct”, “heart” and “mystic” are still in the domain of the Arab, and “policy”, “brain” and “scheme” belong to the

⁴⁰ See Shelley's notes to *Queen Mab*, which Browning had read before 1843.

European.

“Luria” was first published in 1846, four years after “The Return of the Druses” and “Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr”, and continues Browning’s interest in the Arab. As in “The Return of the Druses” and *Ferishtah’s Fancies*, Browning merges Arab themes with Jewish ones⁴¹. Shabtai Zvi brings us back to Luria, a sixteenth-century Jewish mystic and the most prominent Kabbalist in the Jewish tradition, whose work was the trigger for Shabtai Zvi’s movement in the following century. Luria’s philosophy is mentioned in stanza IX of “Abt Vogler”:

What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;

On the earth the broken arcs; in the Heaven, a perfect round.

(71-72)

In Luria’s mythical Kabbala, the “arcs” absorb God’s perfect light at the time of the creation of the universe, yet these “arcs” could not contain the holy light and broke, yet some of the divine sparks clung on to them. These were captured by the forces of evil, exist on earth, and must be returned to God. I am convinced of Browning’s acquaintance with the stories of these famous Jewish figures, though I have yet to find his sources. Luria and the speaker of “Through the

⁴¹An example of Browning’s confusion between Jewish and Arab themes is in “One Word More”, where Browning mentions Karshook instead of Karshish as one of his “fifty men and women”. Karshook is a name he grants a rabbi in an uncollected poem published in *The Keepsake* in 1856, entitled “Ben Karshook’s Wisdom”.

Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr” present a more positive, mystically inspired Semite figure, foreshadowing the later Ferishtah. In “The Return of the Druses”, the Druses lack any authentic religious revelation, but Luria and the speaker of “Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr” are two embodiments of a Romantic “noble savage” who is also endowed with what Browning presents as an enviable intuitive capacity for religious faith. Accordingly, and unlike in *The Return of the Druses*, Luria’s language is not typically that of Browning’s Arab ‘other’, neither is he characterized as a “primitive” magician. His language does not fall apart as does Othello’s in Act V scene 2:

Othello. Yes: - ‘t is Emilia; - by and by. -She’s
 ’T is like she comes to speak of Cassio’s death;
 The noise was high. - Ha! no more moving?
 Still as the grave. - Shall she come in? were’t good? -

In Luria’s most difficult moments, when he learns about the charges against him, and when he decides to commit suicide, his language remains grammatical and eloquent. In addition, Luria is not a false wizard like Djabal, but rather compared with the more positive “mage”:

Secretary.
 ... while he spoke of Florence, turned
 As the Mage Negro King to Christ the Babe. -

I judge his childishness the true relapse
 To boyhood of a man who has worked lately,
 And presently will work, so, meantime, plays:
 Whence more than ever I believe in him.

(Act I)

Thus Luria's character embodies a positive image of the Arab whose simplicity is a virtue, compared with Djabal's cunning, and who is compared to one of the three magi who embrace Jesus, unlike Djabal who is a false and devious magician.

In "Luria", Luria's growth and disillusionment corresponds with Browning's unraveling of his message about "the East". In Act I, Luria believes himself and his culture to be inferior to that of the Florentines.

Luria. Then I may walk and watch you in your streets
 Leading the life my rough life helps no more,
 So different, so new, so beautiful -
 Nor fear that you will tire to see parade
 The club that slew the lion, now that crooks
 And shepherd-pipes come into use again?
 For very lone and silent seems my East
 In its drear vastness – still it spreads, and still

No Braccios, no Domizias anywhere -

Not ever more! – Well, well, to-day is ours!

Domizia. [To Braccio] Should he not have been one of us?

Luria. Oh, no!

Not one of you, and so escape the thrill

Of coming into you, and changing thus, -

Feeling a soul grow on me that restricts

The boundless unrest of the savage heart!

...

Oh, you must find some use for me, Ser Braccio!

You hold my strength; 'twere best dispose of it!

What you created, see that you find food for -

I shall be dangerous else!

In Act V, Luria emphatically utters Browning's message:

Luria. My own east!

How nearer God we were! He glows above

With scarce an intervention, presses close

And palpitatingly, his soul o'er ours!

We feel him, nor by painful reason know!

The everlasting minute of creation

Is felt there; now it is, as it was then;

Browning quotes this passage in the 1881 letter to Furnivall , in which he discusses his belief in evolution and his criticism of it⁴².

When one is taunted (as I notice is often fancied an easy method with the un-Darwinized)-taunted with thinking successive acts of creation credible, metaphysics have been stopped short at, however physics may fare: time and space being purely conceptions of our own, wholly inapplicable to intelligence of another kind – with whom, as I made Luria say, there is an “everlasting moment of creation,” if one at all,-past, present, and future, one and the same state. This consideration does not affect Darwinism proper in any degree.

Thus, in Luria’s statement, the East is extracted from the evolutionary scale: the people of the East do not represent a stage in social evolution, they rather contain the capacity to transcend the human perception of time, and to feel “the everlasting moment of creation”. This idealization of the East as “nearer God” is far from true for Karshish and the Druses. Yet Luria and Djabal do have a few common characteristics: as “Eastern” men Browning endows them with strong feelings, especially passion, but they also contain a “European” element of

⁴²See note 12.

rationality and sophistication.

And inasmuch as Feeling, the East's gift,
 Is quick and transient – comes, and lo, is gone -
 While Northern Thought is slow and durable,
 Oh, what a mission was reserved for me,
 Who, born with a perception of the power
 And use of the North's thought for us of the East,
 Should have remained, turned knowledge to account,
 Giving thought's character and permanence
 To the too-transitory feeling there -
 Writing God's message plain in mortal words.

(Act V)

Luria's initial sense of inferiority is superseded by Browning's portrayal of an ideal East, contrasted with the cultural ailments of the "North". Luria merges Eastern "Feelings" with Northern "Thought" and therefore sees himself as a possible translator of the eastern intuitive grasp of "God's messages" into European language. Language, like thought, is contrasted with feeling in Luria's speech. The translation of "God's messages" from feeling to words already partly diminishes its power. Eastern faith needs no words- simplicity together with a large emotional capacity brings one closer to God than rationality and sophistication, as in the case of the simple minded Lazarus and the educated

Karshish. The translation of this faith into language is what Browning conceives to be one of the goals of the poet, and thus Luria is characterized as a possible mediator between God and humanity, and a poet in potential.

"An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician", like *The Return of the Druses*, presents a clash between two cultures, two languages, and consequently, two conceptions of reality, one of which is Christian and the other Arab. Karshish is the Arab 'other', one who believes in magic, like the Druses, and who encounters the Christian message of love and is unable to embrace it because of what Browning sees as the "primitive" character of his religious beliefs. "An Epistle...of Karshish" depicts a man in the process of "development" or "progress" towards a better self, and it unravels Browning's scheme of the evolution of religion from magic. The idea that religion evolved naturally and that magic is a primitive form of religion was sounded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by philosophers and ethnologists, and consequently, magic became associated with savages who represented the "infancy of man"⁴³.

"An Epistle...of Karshish" is sympathetic towards the Arab and his point of view while nevertheless placing him in a less developed stage than that of the Christian. I will study this clash in terms of language: the magic language of the

⁴³ Hegel claimed that magic is the primary form of religion, and still prevails in African tribes in his "Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion" of 1832. Also see Robin Gilmour's *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), p.59-60.

'other', compared and contrasted by Browning with the language of Christianity. In this poem, the speaker, Karshish, reiterates his feelings of inferiority concerning his own text, while frequently alluding to powerful utterances such as charms and Jesus' utterances. Karshish's sense of inferiority emanates from several causes. For one, Karshish's epistle is subject to a technical problem: whether it will or will not be read by the addressee depends on the good will of the "ambiguous Syrian" in whose hands it is trusted (299). Karshish's helplessness as far as the fate of his text is concerned is mingled with a strong sense of reader-consciousness. He manifests fear of the reader's criticism, which is clear from his frequent apologies (five in number) to the reader for the content of the letter, and two imaginary protestations attributed to the reader. In his letter, Karshish refers to some utterances which he regards as very powerful and which he wishes to acquire for his own use. The two conceptions of powerful language that are evoked in the poem are magical language and the Word, and the tension between them reveals Browning's view of magic as primitive. Like Caliban, Djabal and Paracelsus, Karshish craves the powerful language of magic, yet this craving, along with magic in general, is criticized by the implied author as an unchristian desire for power.

Critics since the nineteenth century tend to regard "An Epistle" in terms of a conflict between scientific empiricism and faith⁴⁴. A major dialectic in the poem

⁴⁴ For examples, see Wilfred L. Guerin, "Irony and Tension in Browning's 'Karshish'", *VP* 1 (1963), p. 132-139; William Irvine, "Four Monologues in Browning's *Men and Women*", *VP* 2 (1964), p.155-164; James R. Bennett, "Lazarus in Browning's 'Karshish'", *VP* 3 (1965), p. 189-191; F. E. L. Priestly, "Some Aspects of Browning's

has been overlooked - one of magic and religion. Karshish is indeed a 'scientist', as critics have claimed, but he is not a nineteenth-century scientist; his profession merges magic with medicine, as was true in biblical times, a fact of which Browning was obviously well aware. Karshish is clearly characterized as a physician-magician throughout the poem, and automatically perceives the miracle of Jesus through a magician's eyes. In this poem, Browning contrasts magic and Christianity: the line between them is threateningly blurred by Karshish, yet Christian humility and love are ultimately reaffirmed. The conflict is highlighted by the tension between magical and religious language, for Karshish is unable to distinguish between charms and what Browning and his implied reader know as Jesus' Word.

One of the first things the reader learns about Karshish is that he practices magic. Karshish encloses in his epistle the following items:

Three samples of true snakestone - rarer still,

One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,

Irony", *Browning's Mind and Art*, ed. by Clarence Tracy (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p.123-142; Norton B. Crowell, *A Reader's Guide to Robert Browning* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), p.131; Le Roy E. Lawson *Very Sure of God: Religious Language in the Poetry of Robert Browning* (Nashville: University of Vanderbilt Press, 1974), p.102; Joseph A. Dupras, "'Writing First of All' in Browning's 'An Epistle... of Karshish'" *SBHC* 7 (1979), p. 7-16; and Cheryl Walsh, "The Voices in Karshish: A Bakhtinian Reading of Robert Browning's Epistle" *VP* 31 (1993), p. 213-226.

(But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)

(17-19)

A snakestone, or a serpentstone, known as a witch-doctor's remedy, is a stone which resembles snake-skin, and is therefore believed to have magical healing powers⁴⁵. But even more relevant to my purpose is the mention of "charms". Karshish's quest for knowledge includes the acquisition and use of powerful language, language that has a mystic, unexplainable effect over objects in the world, language that suspends the laws of nature.

Karshish is tempted to send a recipe for a magic potion to Abib, yet his reverence for occult knowledge stops him from risking it in the hands of the Syrian:

And falling-sickness hath a happier cure
 Than our school wots of: there's a spider here
 Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,

⁴⁵The attribution of magical powers to a snakestone is an example of the principle of "homeopathic magic", coined by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (Part I, ch. I, II, III). This is the principle of similarity, according to which like produces like. Since Browning was well read in works by magicians, this idea was familiar to him, as his letter to Elizabeth Barrett of February the 21st, 1846, shows. In this letter, he refers to a statement made by J. Baptista Porta's in his *Magiae Naturalis*, according to which music played on an instrument made out of wood with medicinal properties, will retain those healing virtues. Browning refers to this as "curious thinking [which] won't do for me and the wise head which is mine", yet the idea appeals to him, since he compares E.B.B.'s letters to that magical music which retains the healing properties of its source (Karlin, *The Courtship*, 1985, p.204).

Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-grey back;
 Take five and drop them...but who knows his mind,
 The Syrian runagate I trust this to?
 (44-49)

Here Browning gives us another glimpse of Karshish's belief in the occult.

Karshish's reluctance to divulge the recipe for the concoction and the image of the spider "on the ledge of tombs", demonstrate the occult character of his knowledge. The effect of this concealment of information on the reader is the creation of suspense, and an assertion of the great power that the speaker attributes to magical language.

As the poem progresses, and the story of Lazarus is told, Browning begins to show how Karshish suggests a comparison between the miracle of Jesus and a magical act⁴⁶. Three points of comparison are made, and the question of the relation between magical and religious language is brought up. In the first comparison Karshish interprets Lazarus's report in the following way:

'Tis but a case of mania - subinduced

⁴⁶ "An Epistle" evokes the traditional Judaeo-Christian conflict between miracle and magic. Beginning with Moses' contest with the magicians of Pharaoh in the Old Testament, this conflict was renewed in the nineteenth century with the reemergence of magic among the educated classes after its eclipse during the enlightenment [Richard Cavendish, *A History of Magic*, (London: Sphere Books, 1977), p. 140]. An example of this conflict is a publication of The Religious Tract Society in 1848, the goal of which was to undermine the alleged supernatural powers of contemporary magicians.

By epilepsy, at the turning-point
 Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:
 When, by the exhibition of some drug
 Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art
 Unknown to me and which 'twere well to know,
 The evil thing out-breaking all at once
 Left the man whole and sound of body indeed, -
 (79-86)

Jesus is seen as a physician-magician who has possibly employed a spell or an exorcism in order to heal Lazarus. This seems like a logical conclusion for Karshish whose belief in the magical power of language has already been maintained by Browning, and will continue to be shown later on in the poem. In this context of spells and charms, the word "rise" uttered by Jesus that brought about the effect, may be seen by Karshish as an instance of magical language. Browning accentuates the appeal that the effect of the powerful word "rise" has on Karshish, by having Karshish quote it twice (101,193).

The extent of Karshish's belief in charms and his occult education are brought up in the second comparison, this time between Lazarus and Karshish and Abib's teacher. Lazarus's attitude towards others is paralleled with the occult teacher's:

... - he regards thee as our lord

Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
 Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
 We both would unadvisedly recite
 Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
 Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
 All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
 Thou and the child have each a veil alike
 Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
 Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
 Over a mine of Greek fire, did ye know!

(167-177)

Both Lazarus and the occult teacher possess knowledge that is radically superior to that of other human beings. Yet their utilization of this knowledge differs greatly: whereas the magician uses this knowledge in order to exert power over nature in the form of charms "able to bid the sun throb wide and burst", Lazarus has no motivation to exert influence. He does not "preach/ The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be," but rather "Be it as God please' reassureth him" (213,219). The mention of his love for "the flowers of the field," an allusion to the "lilies of the field" in Matthew 6:28, is another example of his "prone submission to the heavenly will" (229, 203). Thus, Browning implies one major difference between magic and the Christian religion: whereas magic is characterized by a human aspiration for power, Christianity teaches humility. These lines also teach us

about Karshish's own aspiration for powerful language: he "unadvisedly" uses his teacher's charm to gain power for himself, just like he wishes to know the secret behind the power of Jesus' "rise". Caliban's "primitive" religion and the Druses' also contain an idea of a powerful God rather than a loving one. Browning's assumption, in this comparison between the occult and Christianity as in the two others, is that the reader would find the Christian world view distinctly superior to the one presented by Karshish.

At one point, Karshish states that Lazarus possesses that which he terms "God's secret", the ultimate knowledge the "crumbs" of which Karshish is gathering (lines 201,1). By calling this divine knowledge a "secret", Karshish assumes that God is jealously keeping his knowledge to himself in order to retain his superior powers. Browning wishes to show us Karshish's notion of a universe based on power, in which magical language plays an important role in man's obtaining of some of this power for his own needs.

In the third comparison, this time between Jesus and the occult teacher, the distortion of Christianity in the eyes of a magician recurs:

His death, which happened when the earthquake fell

(Prefiguring, as soon appeared, the loss

To occult learning in our lord the sage

Who lived there in the pyramid alone)

Was wrought by the mad people - that's their wont!
 On vain recourse, as I conjecture it,
 To his tried virtue, for miraculous help -
 How could he stop the earthquake? That's their way!
 (252- 59)

According to Karshish's version of Jesus' death, Jesus angered the people because he did not stop the earthquake, failing to provide "miraculous help" (258). This puts him in a position inferior to that of the magician, who could "bid the sun throb wide and burst" (172). Moreover, the earthquake that occurred at Jesus' death in Matthew 27:51, is perceived by Karshish as a sign foreshadowing the magician's death, thus emphasizing the magician's importance by contrasting it with Jesus' relative insignificance. These three comparisons ultimately present Jesus as a leech-magician who is unquestionably inferior to Karshish and Abib's occult teacher.

Yet this claim, which agrees with Karshish's diagnosis of Lazarus as mad, is only part of the story. Karshish oscillates between this claim and the suggestion that there is something different about the case of Lazarus, a feeling accompanied by the immense appeal that the story of Lazarus holds for him. The allurements of Lazarus's story is manifest throughout the poem; Karshish is captured by it from the very beginning, in spite of his apologies and qualifications.

Karshish is enchanted by the force of Lazarus's story and by Jesus' utterances that Lazarus reiterates. Accordingly, he quotes these same utterances in order to capture Abib's interest. These quotations introduce to the reader a superior kind of language according to Christian tradition: they are instances of the Word itself, since Jesus supposedly utters them. Yet their status in Karshish's mind is dubious: he suggests that Jesus' "rise" is a spell, and the final quotation is qualified by Karshish's final statement: "The madman saith He said so: it is strange". Like "rise", the closing line of the quotation is in the imperative mood: "thou must love me who have died for thee!" (311). In its form, it may be classified by Karshish as another charm, a powerful command from the mouth of a magician, in spite of what the reader recognizes as a distinctly Christian content.

So, through the thunder comes a human voice
 Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!
 Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
 Thou hast no power no may'st conceive of mine,
 But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
 And thou must love me who have died for thee!'
 (306-311)

The quotation that ends the poem may fall under Karshish's definition of a spell, yet Browning trusts the reader to see that its content undermines the

assumptions behind magical language. The magician's quest for power over nature and supernatural entities is contrasted: "Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine", and the centrality of love. "Thou hast no power" is Browning's direct criticism of the magician's quest for power through magical language, and an assertion of his belief in the superiority of the Word to spells and charms. Browning, I suggest, intends his readers to criticize the comparison drawn by Karshish between these two kinds of powerful language. The magician's employment of powerful language for power's sake is contrasted with the Word that along with its apparent power reveals a divine plan of love.

Yet these quotations are not the Word, but rather Browning's poetry simulating the Word. The reader's awareness of this fact brings a new perspective to the issue of powerful language in "An Epistle". Like Karshish's admiration for Jesus' powerful utterances and for his teacher's charms and his desire to appropriate them, Browning has used the most powerful language he knows in order to render his own poem more powerful. The desire for powerful magic language attributed to Caliban, Djabal, and Karshish, finds its source in Browning the poet.

Thus, Caliban and Karshish, in spite of the many differences between them, share Browning's idea of "primitive" religion, an essential part of which is the desire for and use of magic language. Together with the Druses, they represent three stages in Browning's plan of the progress of religion from magic to Christianity.

As in Victorian anthropology, the 'other' embodies those "early" stages, and is placed in the past, rather than as a contemporary. Notwithstanding these Victorian assumptions, Browning's sympathy and respect towards the 'other' is impressive. Michael Theunissen's *The Other*, an extensive study of the philosophy of the 'other', offers a distinction that may help me to define Browning's attitude towards the 'other'. He studies Buber's philosophy of the 'other', as a counterpoint to the philosophy of Husserl and others who perceive the 'other' only in terms of their own self.

Challenging these notions, Buber and other dialogical writers insist on the need to differentiate cognitive subject-object or "I - It" relations from genuine interpersonal contacts where "I" and "Thou" meet in an "in-between" sphere underived from egological intentions. While "I - It" connections are typically relations of domination and subordination rooted in the designs of subjectivity, interpersonal encounter yields an "immediate", that is, egologically not mediated - human bond predicated on the complete "reciprocity" of engagement and the "equal primordially" of partners.⁴⁷

Browning does not achieve a veritable "I - Thou" relationship with the 'other' until 1884 in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, but he certainly attempts to see through the

⁴⁷ Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. by Christopher Macann (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984). From the "Introduction" by Fred R. Dallmayr, p. xvii.

eyes of the 'other', and to understand the 'other's' perception of reality long before 1884. He constructs the 'other' with respect, and gives voice to his perspective, yet he does not let go of the belief in the superiority of his own persuasions. In his late poetry even this belief is partly undermined. In *Ferishtah's Fancies*, written in 1883 and published in 1884 when Browning was seventy two years old, Browning assumes a Persian persona, as his motto demonstrates:

'You, Sir, I entertain you for one of my Hundred; only, I do not like
the fashion of your garments: you will say they are Persian: but let
them be changed.' - *King Lear*

In this collection Browning answers some of the most basic questions of faith, questions and doubts which had troubled him throughout his poetic career and are reflected in his poems⁴⁸. The questions are fundamental and direct, the answers are daring and argumentative. For example, in "Shah Abbas" he develops the problem of the historical grounds for belief already dealt with in "A Death in the Desert", yet this time Browning does not merely present the problematics of historical proof, he goes further and supplies a straightforward statement: one does not need to believe in the historical existence of Jesus in order to be a good Christian. Lord Ali's, Mohammad's son in law, existence is

⁴⁸ Clyde de L. Ryals is one of the few critics who comment on *Ferishtah's Fancies* at length. His reading of the poems in light of "fundamental religious questions", see *Browning's Later Poetry 1871-1889* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p.190-200.

discussed in the poem, to parallel the question of the validity of the New Testament regarding the life of Jesus. Browning places both religions side by side as equal: he premises that Islam and Christianity share the same great theological questions and answer similar human needs. Thus he transcends a very problematic idea of the Arab 'other' as conceived at the time. In the background, the negative representation of the Arab was growing more popular together with Imperialism. Orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries share the theses of "Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West", supported by "ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality", and British Imperialism grasped as a "civilising" power⁴⁹. In popular fiction the image of the Moslem was of one with a sword, treacherous and vengeful. Browning's choice of a Dervish for a persona is odd, considering that Dervishes were seen as dangerous enemies of the empire. In 1881, the Mahdist movement against the Egyptian and British rule in Sudan began to use violent means. The Mahdists were considered Dervishes by European writers of the time, who saw the revolt as one of the Dervishes against Islam⁵⁰. The violent clashes between the British and the Mahdists in Sudan in 1881, 1882 and 1883, ending in the defeat of the expeditionary force headed by General Gordon, were reported in the press and in popular literature⁵¹ of the time. This is hardly a convenient background for Browning's Dervish. The reason for Browning's choice of the

⁴⁹ Said's *Orientalism*, page 206.

⁵⁰ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. by Warren E. Preece (Chicago: William Benton, 1972), vol. 21, p.357.

⁵¹ See Brian V. Street's *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'Primitive' Society in English Fiction 1858-1920* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.71-2.

Dervish as a disguise lies in his understanding of the vocation of the Dervish.

The 1877 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summarises the major studies of the Dervishes in the 1850s and 1860s. The entry reflects the split view of the Moslem in Victorian society, and commences with the negative representation: the Dervishes “belong to no society, but are simply mendicants or single devotees, many of whom subsist by professional jugglery”⁵². This is followed by a “more favourable sense”, according to which “the dervishes represent Sofism, or the spiritual and mystic side of Islam” (113). Their attitude towards conventional Islam is rebellious, and this is the reason for the mistaken perception of the Mahdists as Dervishes fighting Islamic rule. The 1877 entry in the *Britannica* also mentions the Dervishes’ refusal to accept external religious authority:

[T]he dervishes do not recognize the legal exposition which the ordinary tribunals give of the letter of the Koran, and acknowledge no authority but that of their spiritual guide, or of Allah himself speaking directly to their souls(113).

Thus, one of the reasons Browning chose the Dervish as a mask is his identification with this kind of “personal” religion, and his resistance to conventional readings of the Old and New Testament. Indeed, Ferishtah offers unconventional readings of Christian dogma, as we have seen in “Shah Abbas”.

⁵²*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. by T.S. Barnes, 9th edn (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1875-1889), vol. VII (1877), p.113.

Another reason for Browning's choice of a Persian Dervish is his fondness of Persian fables and story-telling, and the contemporary popularity of this genre. *The Arabian Nights* was immensely popular in the 1870s and 1880s, as well as *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, both of which had similar settings. Browning was inspired by the 1818 selection of *The Fables of Pilpay* which he had read as a boy, and Helen Zimmern's 1882 *The Epic of Kings, Stories Retold from Firdusi*, given to him by the author⁵³. Thus, Browning reverts to the Romantic idea of the Arab, and presents a wise philosopher and teacher instead of an inferior "native". Ferishtah is placed in the past, and the Hebrew quotations, especially the one from *Job*, associate him with Biblical times. In doing so Browning evades the issue of the contemporary 'other', as well as grants his poems a biblical aura.

for /

As far as the language of the 'other' is concerned, it is no longer represented as "primitive" and "inferior" as in "An Epistle...of Karshish" and *The Return of the Druses*; it is not a language of magic spells and incantations, power relations, jealousy and vengeance. Browning now represents oriental language as contemplative, poetic and rich, with frequent use of fable and parable in the Persian style as it was known in nineteenth century England. He chooses an 'other' not as a foil meant to reaffirm Victorian superiority but rather as an equal and a mentor. This change in the representation of the 'other' is partly a

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⁵³For both these sources, see John Pettigrew's and Thomas J. Collins' *Robert Browning: The Poems, Volume II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 1095.

(l.c.)

consequence of his growing doubts about Christian(D)ogma⁵⁴. His feelings of religious superiority to other religions are nowhere to be found here - the emphasis is on similarity to the 'other', not on difference in cultural progress. In *Ferishtah's Fancies* Browning achieves that "I - Thou" relationship so rare in Victorian literature pertaining to the 'other'.

⁵⁴ See Mrs. Orr's *Life of Robert Browning*, p.353.

Conclusion

The “Prologue” to *Asolando: Fancies and Facts*, written two months before Browning’s death, encapsulates the development of Browning’s ideas on the tie between supernatural language and poetry. Browning had visited Asolo in 1838 and 1878, and the “Prologue” was written shortly after Browning’s return to Asolo in 1889. The poem is a reply to Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality”: both poems are spoken by an adult poet who compares his youthful perception of nature with his mature one. Yet Browning adds a focus that is thoroughly typical of him: the focus on language and truth.

The first two stanzas are spoken by a “friend”, who is probably Wordsworth, who claims that “‘The Poet’s age is sad’”, because in youth natural objects are lit with an “alien glow” (1, 4).

‘The Poet’s age is sad: for why?

In youth, the natural world could show

No common object but his eye

At once involved with alien glow –

His own soul’s iris-bow.

‘And now a flower is just a flower:

Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, Man –

Simply themselves, uninct by dower

Of dyes which, when life’s day begun,

Round each in glory ran.’

(1-10)

These two stanzas resemble the first two stanzas of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality":

1

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Appareled in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore –
 Turn whereso'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

2

The Rainbow comes and goes,
 And lovely is the Rose,
 The Moon doth with delight
 Look round her when the heavens are bare,
 Waters on a starry night
 Are beautiful and fair;
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;
 But yet I know, where'er I go,
 That there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

(1-18)

Browning's "alien glow" replaces Wordsworth's "celestial light", the "iris-bow" replaces the "Rainbow", and "glory" is used to describe the perception of youth in both poems. Yet Browning's alterations of Wordsworth's phrases reflect his dislike of the poet and his views¹. Browning's main criticism of Wordsworth's Ode is his claim that the "light" and "glory" that Wordsworth had perceived in his youth are not "celestial", but rather "His own soul's iris-bow". The glow is likened by Browning to a coloured "lens":

Friend, did you need an optic glass,
 Which were your choice? A lens to drape
 In ruby, emerald, chrysopras,
 Each object – or reveal its shape
 Clear outlined, past escape,

 The naked very thing? – so clear
 That, when you had the chance to gaze,
 You found its inmost self appear
 Through outer seeming – truth ablaze,
 No falsehood's fancy-haze?

(11-20)

¹ "The Lost Leader", a poem published in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* in 1845, is an attack on Wordsworth's ideological 'betrayal' and growing conservatism. His criticism remained strong, as can be seen in two letters he wrote in 1875 (See Pettigrew, *Robert Browning*, I, p. 1091).

Browning terms Wordsworth's glory mere "falsehood", which hides the object's "inmost self". Following this critical reading of Wordsworth's Ode, Browning describes his own youthful poetic vision:

How many a year, my Asolo,
 Since – one step just from sea to land –
 I found you, loved yet feared you so –
 For natural objects seemed to stand
 Palpably fire-clothed! No –

 No mastery of mine o'er these!
 Terror with beauty, like the Bush
 Burning but unconsumed. Bend knees,
 Drop eyes to earthward! Language? Tush!
 Silence 'tis awe decrees.
 (21-30)

Unlike Wordsworth's glory that was merely his own "iris-bow" projected on nature, Browning insists that *he* had no mastery over his youthful vision. Moreover, the images of "fire-clothed" objects and the "Bush/ Burning" are more powerful than Wordsworth's "glow" and "glory". Browning's own youthful perception did not falsify natural objects, but had rather revealed their divine essence. In "Parleying with Christopher Smart" Browning uses the same 'fire' imagery to describe Smart's unique achievement: poetic language that contains truth. In the "Parleying", Smart

...lit language straight from soul, -

Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
 Live from the censer – shapely or uncouth,
 Fire-suffused through and through, one blaze of truth
 Undeaded by a lie...
 (114-118)

Thus, using all these subtle references, Browning places himself between Wordsworth's "iris-bow" and Smart's "fire-flame" ("Parleying with Christopher Smart, 123) as the poet who, unlike Wordsworth, sees the "truth ablaze", yet has not reached Smart's achievement of matching "Real vision to right language" (151).

In the "Prologue", Browning returns to another important figure in his poetry, the figure of Moses, identifying with his youthful awe in face of God's first revelation to him in the burning bush. The reference to the event of the burning bush is a meaningful one: it is then that God addresses Moses, telling him that he was chosen to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt, and Moses answers: "but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue". As in the previous references to Moses, his slowness of speech symbolises the poet's predicament as Browning grasps it: even the slightest glimpse at divine truth is always accompanied by a human frailty that blocks its communication to others. The weaknesses of language, which do not allow it to express and transmit truth, bring the young Browning to the conviction that "Silence 'tis awe decrees". The stanza ending with these lines reflects Browning's frustration with the frailty of language, and his craving for supernatural language. In the next

stanza Browning describes his mature approach to truth, nature, and language:

And now? The lambent flame is – where?

Lost from the naked world: earth, sky,

Hill, vale, tree, flower, - Italia's rare

O'er-running beauty crowds the eye –

But flame? The Bush is bare.

Hill, vale, tree, flower – they stand distinct,

Nature to know and name. What then?

A Voice spoke thence which straight unlinked

Fancy from fact: see, all's in ken:

Has once my eyelid winked?

No, for the purged ear apprehends

Earth's import, not the eye late dazed:

The Voice said 'Call my works thy friends!

At Nature dost thou shrink amazed?

God is it who transcends.'

(31-45)

As in "Parleying with Christopher Smart", the vision of the "fire-flame" is superseded by the power of naming, "Nature to know and name". "[E]arth, sky,/ Hill, vale, tree, flower," the two lists of natural objects in the last three stanzas celebrate the power of naming, that is to Browning the basis of human knowledge. Donald S. Hair comments that "[t]he verbs 'know and name' suggest the Lockean theory,

where generalizations from sense perception make up our knowledge, and where names are articulate sounds arbitrarily attached to those generalizations"². Browning emphasises the importance of naming in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart":

...Man who, now – the same
 As erst in Eden, needs that all he sees
 Be named him ere he note by what degrees
 Of strength and beauty to its end Design
 Ever thus operates...

(157-161)

Thus in the penultimate stanza of the "Prologue", Browning's identification shifts from Moses to Adam, and the scene is the garden of Eden rather than that of the burning bush. The speaker is no longer silenced, like Moses: the mature poet has regained language, not supernatural or "fire-flame", but human and controllable, and possibly even arbitrary. Yet old habits die hard: Browning cannot be content with human, everyday language, "What then?", he asks. He cannot stand the "Bush" to be bare for long: in line 38 Browning capitalises the "V" in "Voice" in order to leave the reader no room for doubt: it is no other but "the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden"³. Supernatural language returns, only shortly after having been relinquished, in the form of the Word. God speaks again, as in the burning bush, the only difference being that the "purged ear apprehends" rather than the "eye late dazed". Thus, regardless of the content of the supernatural utterance, its inclusion at the end of the poem suggests that Browning cannot give up on supernatural language

²Hair, *Robert Browning's Language*, p.149.

³*Genesis*, 3. 8.

or “the idealist goal of language” as Donald S. Hair terms it. In spite of his claim that he is content with human, flawed language, and its inability to contain truth, a claim that can be found in the clearest form in *The Ring and the Book*, supernatural language does not disappear from his work. As in “An Epistle of...Karshish”, Browning incorporates the Word in the poem, granting his poem an authoritative source and a truth-value which he feels are lacking. In fact, the dynamics I have just suggested in relation to the “Prologue” to Browning’s last collection of poems, is also true of Browning’s first work, *Pauline*. The same ambivalence towards supernatural language emerges from the two texts: an apparent renouncement of supernatural language, while simultaneously using it, either magic language or the Word, in order to empower the poems. To conclude, in spite of the development in his views on magic language, the language of the other, and the Word, Browning’s entrenched craving for powerful poetic language remains unchanged throughout his career. Yet alongside this strong interest and desire, there always lies ambivalence toward the appropriation of supernatural language in order to strengthen his poetry. In *The Ring and the Book* he ostensibly comes to terms with the claim that “human speech is naught”, but supernatural language keeps appearing and reappearing, in an attempt to grant his poetry powers Browning has apparently given up, for rational and religious reasons.

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