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Browning through French Eyes: Gide, Du Bos and other Critics c.1889-1946.

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At first glance the poetry of Robert Browning does not offer an easy foothold to a Frenchman. The vigorous and suggestive manipulation of syntax in the original, with its typically tight, brusque, angular and frequently awkward turns of phrase, is mostly lost in translation as the poetic texts have been converted into French prose. If Browning seems to be idiosyncratic in English, the French translator can only offer a pale or unidiomatic version of the original. The point was made by the critic and academic Louis Cazamian in 1938: Browning's poetry has a basic musicality, but his ear tolerated roughnesses and discords which the average reader cannot easily accept, and the unattractive [*ingrat*] and prosaic character of a large part of his work arises from excessive indulgence in this trait. Cazamian also strikes a very modern note when he says that Browning's words tend to be incomplete signs of thoughts which remain in part implicit, and which the reader himself will have to reconstruct¹. In French the equivalent is to be found not in the poems of Victor Hugo but more probably in the early works of Paul Claudel.

Browning has nevertheless had his French admirers: Joseph Milsand, as is well known, promoted him during his lifetime². Later in the century there were further attempts to introduce the French reading public to a wider English cultural scene in which Browning was included: thus Gabriel Sarrazin in 1889³, Pierre Berger in 1912⁴, Floris Delattre in 1913⁵, and Charles Du Bos especially in his *Journal* and *Approximations* (a series of critical essays) in the period 1922-1923. He finds a place in Émile Legouis and Louis Cazamian's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*⁶, but does not feature in Hippolyte Taine's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863; tenth revised edition 1899). Although Berger's thesis on Browning's religious opinions was published in 1907 it was only later that Browning became the object of academic study in France with a magisterial commentary on his poetry by Bernard Brugière in 1979⁷ which had been preceded by an annotated prose translation of 'Sordello' in 1935 and 'Pippa' in 1936 (a bilingual edition, with a translation into a form of French

¹ *Hommes et Femmes (Men and Women). Poèmes choisis. Traduit, avec une introduction par Louis Cazamian.* Paris: Fernand Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1938, p.lix. The collection comprises 15 poems on the grounds that they constitute the best in the opinion of readers since Browning's day. Included are: 'Fra Lippo Lippi', 'A Toccata of Galuppi's', 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', 'Andrea del Sarto', 'A Grammarian's Funeral', 'Bishop Blougram's Apology'.

² Joseph Milsand, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 August 1851, p.661-689.

³ *La Renaissance de la poésie anglaise 1798-1889.* Paris: Perrin, 1889 (the section on Browning occupies p.199-232).

⁴ *Robert Browning.* Paris: Bloud, 1912 ('Collection des grands écrivains étrangers'); *Quelques aspects de la foi moderne dans les poèmes de Robert Browning.* Paris: Faculté des lettres, Université de Paris, 1907 (thèse complémentaire); articles on Browning's place in English literature and thought in the *Revue de synthèse historique*, August-September 1910.

⁵ *De Byron à Francis Thompson.* Paris: Payot, 1913 (this includes his previously published article 'La Pensée religieuse de Robert Browning', p.105-143); 'L'Obscurité de Browning', *Revue germanique*, May-June 1913, p.299-314.

⁶ Paris: Hachette, 1921. The section on Browning, by Cazamian, occupies p.1127-33.

⁷ *L'Univers imaginaire de Robert Browning.* Paris: Klincksieck, 1979.

blank verse), both by Paul de Reul⁸. Two prominent literary journals, the *Mercure de France* and the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, featured articles, translations and notes which I shall discuss below⁹. Summaries of several poems and several short extracts in French can be found in Sarrazin (notably, short extracts from ‘Paracelsus’) and in Berger. Delattre (1913), who provides the English text in his notes, gives partial translations of ‘Pauline’, ‘Paracelsus’, ‘Pippa Passes’, ‘Christmas Eve’, ‘Rabbi Ben Ezra’, ‘Saul’, ‘Cleon’, ‘A Death in the Desert’ and ‘Prospice’. De Reul notes partial translations of ‘Sordello’ in Brocher (1930) and Hovelaque (1933)¹⁰. However, two notable translations did appear in full in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*: ‘Une Tache au blason’, by E. Sainte-Marie Perrin (1920)¹¹, and, in 1921, ‘Monsieur Sludge le médium’ by Paul Alfassa and Gilbert de Voisins, with an introduction by the translators in collaboration with André Gide, who was, as we shall see, the promoter of this publication¹². What provoked the postwar renewal of interest in Browning is not clear, but it may well have stemmed from Gide’s own personal enthusiasm since the people involved were close to the circle of friends who produced the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. The following year, Alfassa, who was a historian with a special interest in oriental art and had also translated Edith Wharton’s *A Son At the Front*, published a collection of Browning’s poetry in collaboration with de Voisins, prefaced by a study on Browning’s life and thought by Mary Duclaux¹³. The book comprises a translation of some fifteen poems taken for the most part from ‘Dramatic Lyrics and Romances’, ‘Men and Women’ and ‘Dramatis Personae’, including notably ‘The Pied-Piper of Hamelin’, ‘Porphyria’s Lover’, ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’ and ‘Mr Sludge, the “Medium”’. Of ‘Pippa Passes’ only five lines are quoted as an epigraph to the poems (‘The year’s at the Spring ~ All’s right for the world’), and all the translations are in prose.

The material contained in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century prefaces and commentaries often highlights the doubts which the critics and translators felt. ‘I would be slow to assert that Browning’s poetry will survive,’ wrote Duclaux in the 1922 translation; ‘There will certainly be a very large element of waste, for Browning

⁸ *Sordello. Première traduction intégrale, introduction, sommaires et notes par Paul de Reul*. Brussels: Éditions de la Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1935 (a worthy attempt at deciphering the text where the translator has not always been able to resolve the original ambiguities). *Pippa. Traduit et préfacé par Paul de Ruel*. Paris: Fernand Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1936 (Collection bilingue des classiques français, sous la direction de L.Cazamian) – the translation is set out line by line facing the original.

⁹ A few shorter poems appeared as occasional pieces in translation in Charles Des Guerrois’s *Étude sur Mistress Elizabeth Browning, suivie de ses quarante-quatre ‘Sonnets portugais’*...in 1885. A prose translation of ‘Hervé Riel’ was included in a small pamphlet as part of *Poètes anglais contemporains... Traduction inédite par A.Buisson du Berger*. Paris: Henri Gautier, 1890 (Nouvelle Bibliothèque populaire 215, p.319-320) – the poem was chosen for its Breton subject matter and, possibly, to mark the poet’s death. ‘La Chevelure d’Or, histoire de Pornic’ featured in the Abbé J. Dominique’s *Le Poète Browning à Ste-Marie-de-Pornic* in 1900. ‘Cleon’ was translated into French blank verse by René Lalou in A.Koszul’s *Anthologie de la littérature anglaise*. Paris: C.Delagrave, 1913, vol.2, p.301. Later, a translation by Pierre Berger of ‘La Saisiaz’ (in prose) featured as a special commemorative publication of the English Department of Baylor University, Waco, Texas, in 1932.

¹⁰ Henri Brocher, *La Jeunesse de Browning et le poème ‘Sordello’ [Thèse.]* Geneva: Jent, 1930; Henri Hovelaque, *Browning’s English in ‘Sordello’ [Thèse.]* Paris: Les Presses modernes, 1933.

¹¹ *N.R.F.*, LXXXI, June 1920, p.788-841 (a prose translation which is at times a little stilted or unidiomatic and does not always adhere closely to the text).

¹² *N.R.F.*, XCI, April 1921, p.414-461 (overall a faithful and idiomatic prose translation, but see note 55).

¹³ *Poèmes de Robert Browning. Traduits par Paul Alfassa et Gilbert de Voisins, et précédés d’une étude sur sa pensée et sa vie par Mary Duclaux*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1922 (Les Cahiers Verts, 12).

cared little for verbal beauty and still less for the harmony of proportions. But much will survive, for although beauty occurs only rarely in his verse, when it does so it is new and surprising [...] It is possibly because of his fragmented, myopic vision of things that he has been so acute in spying out the detail of souls [...] He says nothing of Man in general [...] but no poet has so sharply felt the nobility and tragic complexity of human conscience. However, what ensures above all that his verse continues to live while other great Victorians seem to us old-fashioned is his obstinate devotion to hope', and 'His robust faith is triumphant as he tells us that while this life is sweet, death is doubtless better.' This rather paradoxical critical judgment in fact reveals the extent to which Browning has been valued by the French for his perceived religious values.

On the other hand, Gide's 1921 preface to Alfassa's 'Sludge' does not take up the point about religion, except to say that at the date of the poem's composition Browning used the form of the dramatic monologue to avoid 'the terrible Victorian censorship' while he transgressed the norms of that society, 'no doubt' taking advantage of his reputation for obscurity.

Indeed, the charge of obscurity and the praise of his fine religious feelings are both recurring themes in French criticism of Browning. And Sarrazin, not surprisingly for a late nineteenth-century determinist, also saw the poet as 'typical of his time': he was 'essentially analytical and scientific' as he 'dramatised the over-excitement of the psyche'. Sarrazin nevertheless recognised Browning's 'subtle imagination', relying for his evidence on an extract which he quoted in French from A.J.A. Symons¹⁴. There follow appreciative criticisms of 'Paracelsus' ('What energetic [*fougueuse*] faith', and 'What a leap into the Ideal'¹⁵), 'A Soul's Tragedy' and 'The Ring and the Book'. Sarrazin, without referring to Carlyle, sees Browning as the creator of 'a new moral interpretation of self' and comments: 'Browning, with a completely new dramatic form, clothes that idea which is so alien to countries of the Latin race, namely that only worthless men, bandits and corrupted artists can be shown to consider life as a play where the sole hero is Success, however base, but which is always amusing regardless of the means by which they achieve it provided they are skilful.'

Delattre noted that, despite Berger's exemplary book of the previous year it was very regrettable that Browning's poetry was so unknown in France¹⁶. He considered that it was seen as 'tangled [*touffu*]' and complex, which acted as a counterweight to its value. 'Browning's very varied output,' he continued, contained 'long monologues of minute psychologising', 'interminable tales', and 'lyrical poems whose conciseness of expression renders them often virtually impenetrable'¹⁷. But it is to the religious significance of the poems that he continually returns, and this element is obviously seen to outweigh all the disadvantages which the poetry presents: 'Pauline' is considered as the embodiment of religious disquiet; 'Paracelsus' expresses the journey through doubt to belief in immortality; 'Pippa Passes' is a vibrant act of faith. Asserting that after 1841 Browning rejected all Churches because they were 'incompletely true', Delattre sees 'Christmas Eve' as expressing a lesson of tolerance,

¹⁴ *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*. London: Cassell, 1886, p.10-11.

¹⁵ Sarrazin, *op. cit.*, p.208-215.

¹⁶ Delattre, *op. cit.*, p.216-7.

¹⁷ Delattre, *op. cit.*, p.105.

liberal protestantism and intense spiritualism. 'Saul' encapsulates 'the supreme humanity of God' because 'He loves human love with all its tribulations.' In 'A Death in the Desert' we are shown doubt at the end of a life, but 'this lack of certainty [...] is a precious element of faith. It provides the experience and the discipline which are indispensable for solid belief.' Browning's religious thought, declares Delattre, 'concludes in energetic action'¹⁸. In his opinion the reason why we should still be paying attention to Browning lies in this very witness to a liberal and open-hearted Christianity which is in no way incompatible with the wide aspirations of the modern (pre-1914) soul. For these critics what was perceived as the ideal expression of romantic love between Robert and Elizabeth no doubt informed their understanding of these issues.

Pierre Berger's *Robert Browning* (1912) is the first substantial monograph in French on the poet's life and works. The avowed aim of the book is to make Browning better known in France, and to that end it will be 'neither a work of erudition, nor one of literary criticism'. It will, in fact, quite successfully combine both these aspects of its subject within the critical parameters of the time. Berger, writing for a general educated public, limited himself to what he considered to be a representative choice of poems: 'Paracelsus' to illustrate the 'great romantic poems' of the early period; 'Pippa Passes' for 'drama, which is psychological not theatrical'; some lyrical poems taken from 'Bells and Pomegranates', 'Men and Women' and 'Dramatis Personae'; 'Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day' for religion; 'The Ring and the Book' as a representative long psychological poem. 'Pippa Passes' is seen as 'a literary marvel, so fine in conception, so profound and comforting, so varied, so strongly and so delicately executed, at some moments throbbing with passion at others vibrating with enthusiasm and ardor'¹⁹. And whereas Berger finds 'Prospice' 'sublime', he considers that in 'One Word More' the poet becomes a poet through love for the beloved and, more generally, Browning expresses the problem which is shared by us all, namely how to find the soul which will complete our own. In a chapter on Browning's religious position a long analysis of 'Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day' leads him to the conclusion that Browning wished for no other form of worship than personal prayer and no other church than the starry heavens. This poem, 'bizarrely conceived and with a sometimes overlong and somewhat confused argument' is seen to conclude with a 'trembling cry of hope mingled with doubt'. Passing on to 'The Ring and the Book' Berger summarises the story and the argument, regretting that there is less poetic beauty in this work since it is 'dominated by a philosophical and argumentative element'. If the poet remains veiled here and in the poems of the final period we can at least admire the subtle thinker and the profound psychologist. Berger concludes by reminding us that just as the English see in Browning an energetic and optimistic man of thought we must recognise that he almost never wrote poems with the sole aim of pursuing poetic beauty. And this, for Berger, is the stumbling block: although he himself admired Browning's 'prolix complexity' for its 'luxurious superabundance' he was sure that here was the characteristic which 'was firstly responsible for alienating the French mind which admires order, clarity and simplicity'²⁰. Berger's final comment on Browning's use of dramatic voices is embedded in the determinist theory of his time: the poet allegedly manifests the 'contemporary taste for minute scientific analysis. This taste led him not only to engage with the art of the dramatist –

¹⁸ Delattre, *op. cit.*, p.132.

¹⁹ Berger, *op. cit.*, p.101.

²⁰ Berger, *op. cit.*, p.250-1.

that is to say to show the external manifestations of the soul – but also, as a psychologist, to seek out the reasons which cause them, namely the hidden and almost subconscious springs of action'²¹. In none of this analysis is there yet a recognition of the value of fragmented viewpoints in a dialectic of the representation of reality.

In 1890 Alfred Vallette relaunched the *Mercure de France* and from then onwards this influential periodical provided in the pages of its 'Revue de la quinzaine' a well-informed section on English literature. Henry-D. Davray, an indefatigable translator and literary journalist, was its English correspondent and ran the column from 1896. He first mentioned Browning when he reviewed G.K. Chesterton's *Robert Browning* in 1903²², praising the book as an excellent introduction to the difficult art of understanding the poet. He highlighted the paradoxical idea that Browning's obscurity, 'which has alienated many a reader', had its origins in exactly the opposite causes to those which are normally cited. 'He was unintelligible not through pride but through humility'; 'It is not because his thoughts are vague but because they are evident'; 'Browning believes that the street hums with his ideas' and hence his heart is full of humility; 'His impenetrable poetry is the natural expression of this fine optimism.' Davray's brief eulogy was no doubt intended to encourage his French readers to attempt to decipher the poetry. A short notice of the first volume of the *Poetical Works*, published by Grant Richards, next appeared in 1904²³: 'All these titles call to mind the great dramatic poems which constitute Browning's glory' – the critic was doing no more than reflect the esteem in which the English public held the poet, but a brief note on the publication of the letters of Browning and Alfred Domett by F.G. Kenyon is despatched with the comment: 'These letters are not of general interest'²⁴. The centenary year 1912 provided an extended 'Revue' which was dedicated to a selection of contemporary English critical opinions²⁵. It seemed to Davray that despite Edmund Gosse's praise Browning's reputation in England was suffering an eclipse, and Kenyon's edition of the poems could perhaps have done more than 'neglect the explanation of obscure and difficult passages while it simply situated each poem in the context of Browning's life'. In the summer of 1913 Davray reviewed Berger's 'excellent' book on Browning and no doubt helped to stimulate French interest in the poetry by doing so (Berger's 'copious translations allow one to appreciate the extraordinary diversity and the great inspiration [*le grand souffle*] of this poetry whose value is no longer in doubt'²⁶). Perhaps to reinforce this message, Davray was recording in October that Browning was 'among those who are

²¹ Berger, *op. cit.*, p.250. Chesterton reacted to this: 'It is a gross and complete slander upon Browning to say that his processes of thought are scientific in their precision and analysis' (*Robert Browning*, London: Macmillan, 1903, p.134. The work was translated into French in 1928).

²² *Mercure de France*, XLVII, July-September 1903, p.257-8. There is also a later review by Ramon Fernandez who praises his ideas on Browning: 'Les Essais: G.K.Chesterton', *N.R.F.*, CLXX, 1927, p.656-660.

²³ *Mercure de France*, LI, July-September 1904, p.548. (*The Poetical Works*. London: Grant Richards, 1904-8: World's Classics).

²⁴ *Mercure de France*, LX, March-April 1906, p.614 (London: Smith Elder, 1906).

²⁵ Articles by George Saintsbury in *The Bookman*, Francis Gribble (*The 19th Century and After* – an article on Browning's optimism), a poem on Browning by Alfred Noyes together with an article on the parallel between Browning and Wordsworth by H.C. Minchin in the *Fortnightly Review*, and reference to *The Athenaeum*, *The Cornhill Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The Saturday Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

²⁶ *Mercure de France*, CIV, July-August 1913, p.426.

experiencing renewed critical interest²⁷, possibly resulting from the recent publication of his letters²⁸. Two further notes, which were published in 1916, close the account²⁹: the first, by Théodore Stanton, is an appreciation of Lyon Phelps's *Robert Browning. How to Know Him* ('the aim of this book is to help the reader appreciate all the beauties which the critic saw there himself'). The second, by Davray, is a necrological article on Stopford Brooke ('his criticism, which was characterised by subjective acuity, sometimes took on a strongly dogmatic tone which alienates the reader, and this is more especially the case with his *Browning*³⁰, where the versatility and the intellectual power of his subject went well beyond his reach'). The *Mercur de France* also published the correspondence of Browning and Carlyle, translated and presented by Émile Masson in 1916³¹.

After the Great War the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, which had been founded in November 1908, challenged the leadership of the *Mercur de France* and became an important focus for literary innovation. It also aimed to play an significant role in introducing the French public to European literature. Among the several important figures who were associated with the periodical were Charles Du Bos, who worked assiduously in the background, and André Gide. Du Bos (1882-1939) was a very bookish man, who had a wide-ranging and enthusiastic acquaintance with English literature. He was more a belletrist than an academic critic, and if his insights were frequently subjective he was assiduous in promoting an awareness of English literature in France through numerous articles, lectures, debates at the 'Décades' at Pontigny and in discussion with his friends, including Gide and the other directors of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*³².

Although Du Bos converted to Catholicism at the age of 44 in 1926 he had always been particularly sensitive to the religious aspects of Browning's poetry and, in particular, to what he considered was the ideal nature of the poet's relationship with Elizabeth. In forming this opinion Du Bos was, of course not alone. His *Journal*³³ contains several significant comments on Browning, especially in the years 1922-3, and his *Approximations* feature a significant 'Note sur Browning en France', dated

²⁷ *Mercur de France*, CV, September-October 1913, p.639. Referring to '*The Ring and the Book*', with an introduction by E.Dowden. London: O.U.P., 1912 (Dowden's earlier book on Browning had appeared in 1904).

²⁸ *Mercur de France*, CV, September-October 1913, p.657 (article on Charlotte Brontë). The letters of Robert and Elizabeth had been published in 1899, those with Dommett in 1906, to various correspondents including T.J.Wise (in a limited edition) in 1907 and 1912.

²⁹ *Mercur de France*, CXIV, March-April 1916, p.524; CXVI, July-August 1916, p.336.

³⁰ *Mercur de France*, CXVI, July-August 1916, p.336. S.A.Brooke, *The Poetry of Browning*, London: Isbister & Co., 1902.

³¹ *Mercur de France*, CXVIII, November-December 1916, p.385-416 (17 letters between 14 May 1847 and 27 March 1879).

³² See Angelo Philip Bertocci, *Charles Du Bos and English Literature. A Critic and his Orientation*. New York: King's Crown Press, 1949. A. Heurgon, *Paul Desjardins et les Décades de Pontigny*. Paris: 1964. In a letter to Gide dated 16 October 1945, Ernst Robert Curtius refers to a discussion at Pontigny in 1922 on writers who have stimulated modern thought: the French named Whitman, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky (one can see here the obvious influence of Gide, who also insisted on adding Goethe), the Italians Carducci and Croce, the English Browning and Meredith (*Deutsch-französische Gespräche 1920-1950*, edited by H. and J.M.Dieckmann. Frankfurt: V.Klostermann, 1980).

³³ Charles Du Bos, *Journal 1921-[1939]*. Paris: Corrêa [La Colombe], 1946-61.

July 1923³⁴. All the notes come after the publication of the translations in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, but there is good evidence to suggest that Du Bos had been interested in Browning before that date and that he slowly matured his articles over extended periods of time. Thus he wrote on 26 July 1927 that he would like to be able to recall the plan which Gide had confided to him in 1917 or 1918, namely to have a story retold by all the characters as Browning had done in ‘The Ring and the Book’. However, when it came to the event – and despite Du Bos’s encouragement to persist – Gide, he noted, was far too impatient (unlike Henry James) to carry this procedure out and had only approximated to it in his *Faux-Monnayeurs*³⁵. Du Bos recorded another conversation with Gide on 25 August 1922³⁶ in which he himself had remarked on the close similarity between ‘A Death in the Desert’, ten lines of which Gide had suggested he should include in an article, and Gide’s confessional ‘dark night of the soul’, *Numquid et tu...*, which was as yet unpublished but already dedicated to Du Bos.

Browning is likened by Du Bos to a ‘battering ram attacking the gateway to our soul’, and he is ‘the Brahms of poetry’³⁷. He ‘overflows: he is like an incandescent sun and he cannot see anything *que décuplé* [‘but multiplied tenfold’] by the lavishness of his own rays’³⁸. And Du Bos refers approvingly to Chesterton’s remarks on Browning’s ‘difficult simplicity’³⁹. For Du Bos, however, it is love which provides the most significant perspective. On 5 March 1923, commenting on an article by Percy Lubbock in the *Quarterly* of October 1912 on what constitutes the greatness of love in Browning, Du Bos wrote: ‘Browning’s lovers look love in the face but none must be ashamed of his or her soul [...] In a great love we are not two but three, and the third, which is constituted by our most precious sentimental substance and born from the union of the two, can eventually become more important than either of the two taken in isolation’⁴⁰. After the Great War, Du Bos reflected pessimistically with a characteristic melancholy on universal love: ‘Men like Browning and Chekhov are more necessary than anyone else in France at the present time when we are forgetting what we have in common with our fellow men’⁴¹. In fact, the ‘plenitude of human love’ for Du Bos was represented by the relationship of Robert and Elizabeth⁴², and he also referred to this, drawing a parallel with Coventry Patmore: ‘The fullest notion of human love which has ever existed – I mean the Brownings’ – is perhaps not a

³⁴ *Approximations*. Paris: Fayard [La Colombe], 1965 (the essays were originally published between 1914 and 1937). Additionally, his lecture ‘Pauline de Browning’ was published posthumously, *Études anglaises*, April 1954, p.163.

³⁵ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 3, p.331 (26 July 1927). The point is not that Browning’s view is kaleidoscopic (which was rather the effect at which Gide aimed), but that each character’s viewpoint, says Du Bos, was substituted for that of the author. This can be placed in parallel with an earlier observation: ‘Browning has no personal point of view. He adopts the point of view of everyone whom he puts on stage so completely that he becomes obsessed by each’, Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.187 (19 September 1922).

³⁶ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.173.

³⁷ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.143-4 (20 July 1922, citing Duclaux’s preface – see note 12).

³⁸ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.332 (14 September 1923). The words are in English in the text.

³⁹ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.382 (15 December 1923).

⁴⁰ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.239-242. It should perhaps be noted that several of Du Bos’s friends strongly doubted that he had ever been reciprocally in love with another person.

⁴¹ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.296 (24 May 1923). See also *Approximations* 7 (March-April 1934), p.1332: on mystics – Browning’s ‘decisive reason: “If precious be the soul of man to man”, and “Browning, the expert musician of the counterpoint of souls”’ (*ibid.*, p.1336).

⁴² Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 8, p.42 (10 April 1933).

Christian notion. But elsewhere Coventry Patmore based his Catholicism – and the most mystic Catholicism – on the very notion of conjugal love where he saw the most convincing symbol of invisible realities⁴³. In a way similar to Patmore's, Browning 'in so English and so human a manner in many passages in his work, as, for example, in "Any Wife to Any Husband" where the contrast is so memorably recorded between the "finite" [*finie*] woman, in the sense that she is the repository of fidelity, stability and conservation [*etc.*], and the man, who is "undefined" [*indéfini*] – man of whom Browning wrote in "A Death in the Desert": "I say that man was made to grow, nor stop"⁴⁴.

At the date when Du Bos was writing his article on Browning he was nevertheless rather pessimistic about the poet's chance of success in France, for the majority of Frenchmen still found him 'exotic'. What might cause them to review their opinion, he considered, was to recall the personal qualities of the poet, for they result in creating his aesthetic quality. Browning was one of those people who give themselves, he wrote, rather than simply yield themselves after pressure. In this way, 'the removal of self in fundamental relationships is accompanied by a corresponding liberation and expansion in the sphere of the creative imagination'⁴⁵. Despite Milsand's original articles ('the first and best of his interpreters'⁴⁶) the modern debate, he considered, should address three issues, quite separately from the 'unbelievable flatness' which Browning's poetry presented in translation⁴⁷. These were: first, in relation to Gide and the matter of each character's point of view replacing that of the author⁴⁸; second, in opposition to the '*N.R.F.* view' on love and happiness (in Du Bos's opinion members of the *N.R.F.* regrettably tended to be anti-Catholic if not downright freethinking); third, the significance of 'Pauline'. Of these perhaps Gide presented the most insidious challenge to Du Bos's way of seeing Browning.

André Gide, writing on 6 January 1921 to Jacques Rivière who was at the time a fellow member of the editorial board of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, gave strong advice about the names of those English poets who should feature in the periodical. The two most important of those, he said, who were 'totally unknown' in France were Blake and Browning ('especially Browning'). Gide had previously sounded out another Catholic, Paul Claudel, in 1908 and had received a rather peremptory but

⁴³ On Patmore's selected poems, translated by Paul Claudel and with an essay by Valery Larbaud, *N.R.F.*, XXXIII-XXXIV, September 1911, p.273-308, 385-419. See *Approximations* 7, 'L'Amour selon Coventry Patmore', January-February 1936, p.1458: 'Among the greatest poets only Patmore and Browning have been haunted by what Patmore calls "the fruition of the eternal novelty" of ideal marriage' (E.Gosse, *Coventry Patmore*. London Hodder and Stoughton, 1905, p.38). '[We see] the finest example of [conjugal] happiness inspired by "By the Fireside"' (*Approximations* 2, 'Jacques Rivière', January 1923, p.467); and, in the same poem, 'inexhaustible and forever ascending metamorphoses' (*Approximations* 7, 'Marcelle Sauvageot', December 1933, p.1325).

⁴⁴ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 5, p.236 (26 November 1929). This quotation was put to another use by Gide (20 June 1919: see below), but it is worth remembering that the distinguishing characteristics of male and female gender are strikingly similar to those elaborated by Gide in *Corydon* (composed round about 1908).

⁴⁵ *Approximations* 4, 'Le Legs de Hoffmansthal', September-October 1929, p.151.

⁴⁶ *Approximations* 2, 'Note sur Robert Browning en France', July 1923, p.364.

⁴⁷ Du Bos, *Journal*, vol. 1, p.244 (6 March 1923): 'The more poetry deliberately approaches the tone of prose and conversation [as does Browning's], the less easily can it be transferred into another language without acquiring an unbelievable flatness'.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: Du Bos also quotes judgments on Browning by Gosse ('Browning in France', *More Books on the Table*. London: Heineman, 1923), George Saintsbury and Henry James, citing the latter's by now well-known observation on Browning's use of the disintegration of point of view.

positive reply: ‘Browning has all the faults of the authors of his nation: prolixity, bad taste, and an incredible lack of order. But his imagination is first rate and he has an advantage over all other English poets in that in a quite natural manner he finds poetry wherever he goes in the most ordinary of life’s paths. Moreover, his verse is not vague and woolly [*flottant*] like Shelley’s [...] but is curiously complex and finely wrought like that of the Latin satirists’⁴⁹. It appears that Gide already had some knowledge of Browning in 1901⁵⁰, but it is in the period 1914 to 1938 that his enthusiasm took hold, no doubt benefitting from his conscientious attempts to learn English from 1917 onwards. ‘I am so strongly convinced,’ he wrote in 1921, ‘that Browning should be one of the beacons of tomorrow that it is not without pride that I am one of the first [*sic*] to have spoken of him and to have brought him to the attention of the French’⁵¹. His reading seems to have begun with ‘Pippa Passes’ in April 1914 and ‘Pauline’ in October of the same year⁵². On 10 October 1918, alongside a reading of Chesterton’s book on Browning (‘Some very acute remarks which are drowned in a torrent of dialectic [*etc.*]’), Gide discovered ‘Mr Sludge the Medium’ (‘prodigious’⁵³), ‘Prospice’ (‘particularly close to me’; ‘glorious’), and ‘The Worst of It’ (‘the beginning is admirable’)⁵⁴. The previous year he had read George Santayana on Browning⁵⁵.

Comparisons, says Gide, can be drawn with Victor Hugo, the archetypal great French poet: ‘While reading “Saul”, “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Andrea del Sarto” I thought “But we have Victor Hugo [...]”, only to stand in consternation at the gigantic vapidness of those sublime verses’⁵⁶. What then constituted Browning’s particular value in Gide’s eyes? His extraordinary love of life⁵⁷; he was a writer in whom, like Blake, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Gide could recognise his own mind⁵⁸; and his optimism (‘More than the form and manner of their work, what causes one to connect Browning and Dostoevsky is, I believe, their optimism [...] which is close to that of Nietzsche and Blake’⁵⁹). But it is precisely the ‘form and manner’ which undeniably constitute one of the major reasons for Gide’s interest in Browning. In a conversation in 1922 he declared that he was not particularly concerned with Browning’s philosophy. It was his standing as ‘the greatest dramatist since Shakespeare’ which impressed him above all⁶⁰. But was he speaking of Browning as a writer of plays (he had read both ‘A Blot

⁴⁹ P.Pollard, *Répertoire des lectures d’André Gide II: Lectures anglaises*. London: Birkbeck College, 2004, citation 2290 (C Claudel to Gide, 8 November 1908).

⁵⁰ Pollard 3420 (Gide to Kassner, 28 February 1901, commending Kassner’s [unspecified] comments on Browning).

⁵¹ Pollard 2323 (Gide to J.Rivière, 11 March 1921). ‘Beacons’ [*phares*] is an allusion to Baudelaire’s poem of the same name which encodes the symbol of the greatest artists, inspired leaders and enlighteners of mankind.

⁵² Pollard 2291 (*Journal*, I p.766, April 1914), and 2292 (*ibid.*, p.876, 8 October 1914).

⁵³ ‘The exaltation and sparkle [*diaprure*] of the original is lost in Alfassa’s translation’ (Pollard 2313, Gide to J.Rivière, 24 February 1920).

⁵⁴ Pollard 2295 (Gide, *Journal*, 10 October 1918).

⁵⁵ Pollard 4026 (Gide, *Journal*, 1 November 1917: *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, London: A.& C.Black, 1900).

⁵⁶ Pollard 2302 (Gide, *Journal*, 26 October 1918).

⁵⁷ Pollard 2362 (Gide, *Journal*, 12 March 1938).

⁵⁸ Pollard 2188 (Gide, *Journal*, 16 January 1922), and 2220 (*ibid.*, 4 November 1927).

⁵⁹ Pollard 3397 (*Dostoevski*, 1922).

⁶⁰ Pollard 3996 (*Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.116, 7 April 1922). Cazamian considered that Browning’s monologues were direct expressions of the soul with the spontaneity which that implies, and that they were unlike the dialectical rhetoric which we see in Corneille’s plays (the contrast would

in the Scutcheon' and 'Luria', following the advice of his friend Jacques Copeau, director of the Vieux Colombier Theatre, but considered them very probably unsuitable for the stage⁶¹)? Or was he referring to Browning, the creator of dramatic monologues? In this second case he was alert to the advantages offered by the poet's fragmentation of narrative viewpoint⁶², and when we look more closely at his comments we can see that he distinguished several ways in which Browning allegedly used the technique. The first point he made was on the 'fugal structure' of Browning's writing⁶³. This can be further analysed into the poems where the narrative is carried forward by the use of multiple points of view (the 'best example' is 'The Ring and the Book' which Gide discovered 'with great admiration' in 1921⁶⁴). Such 'variable perspectives' are likened on one occasion to James Hogg's double narrative in the *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, where the hero sees events a second time 'illuminated by conscience in a tragic introspection'⁶⁵.

But the single point of view, the monologue, is also considered to be a significant narrative tool, since in Browning's hands (and in this respect Gide sees his achievement as similar to Dostoevsky's) it reached the most diverse and subtle level of perfection that can be attained⁶⁶. Nor is there a single type of dramatic monologue: Gide concurred with an observation by Valery Larbaud that Browning's use of this device was not similar to James Joyce's and that within Browning's poetry itself one can distinguish between 'My Last Duchess', 'which is a theatrical monologue taking the form of a tirade addressed to a dumb interlocutor', and other examples in 'The Ring and the Book' which are in fact more close to Joyce. To the first of these Gide added 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' and 'Mr Sludge, the Medium'⁶⁷. If such a speech act is truly one-sided it was available to be reworked, Gide reflected, as he had done in *Les Caves du Vatican* where the assassination of Fleurissoire by Lafcadio is narrated and explained only through the latter's monologue⁶⁸. Furthermore, just as a form of psychological truth may be revealed by an interior monologue, and a fragmentation of reality be achieved by a fugal composition of competing points of view, so these devices can also be used to mislead the reader when an apparently 'confessional' narrative reveals the fictional person's character but not the author's⁶⁹. Should this be called authorial subterfuge or literary artifice?

occur naturally to many cultivated Frenchmen); since Browning was better able to analyse character than to create conflict his dialogues were essentially non-dramatic (*Hommes et Femmes* (1938), p.ix).

⁶¹ Pollard 2310 (Gide to Copeau, 15 December 1919).

⁶² See Sandro Volpe, 'Il "point de vue" nella riflessione teorica gidiana: la genesi dei *Faux-Monnayeurs*', *Esperienze letterarie*, IX (4), October-December 1984, p.91-1-6. Volpe draws attention to an early project of Gide's (*Isabelle*, 1911, together with its draft preface, which features a plan to narrate the story through multiple points of view, but this strategy can in fact be traced back to one of Gide's earliest publications, *Le Traité du Narcisse*, 1891). He also comments on 'stereoscopic' and 'panoramic' narrative models, with reference to Genette.

⁶³ Pollard 2308 (*Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.30, 4 August-17 September 1919).

⁶⁴ Pollard 2327 (Gide, *Journal*, 29 November 1921) and 2330 (Gide to D.Bussy, 12 December 1921).

⁶⁵ Pollard 3323 (*Préfaces*, p.138, 1946).

⁶⁶ Pollard 3397 (*Dostoevski*, p.195, 1922), referring to the short episode 'Krotkaia' in Dostoevsky's *Pages from the Journal of an Author*. Gide singles out for mention 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover', noting especially the two depositions of Pompilia's husband in 'The Ring and the Book'.

⁶⁷ Pollard 2342 (Larbaud to Gide, 29 July 1923) and 2343 (Gide to Larbaud, 31 July 1923).

⁶⁸ Pollard 3932 (Gide to E.Dujardin, no date).

⁶⁹ Pollard 2350 (Gide to X, no date).

‘It is not exactly that Browning is confessing himself in ‘Blougram’, ‘Sludge’, or ‘Andrea del Sarto’,’ wrote Gide, but his ‘elastic soul’ identified itself with each character in turn in order to create them (a sort of Keatsian negative capability). ‘And since one can only perfectly depict a feeling if one experiences it oneself I agree that it must be himself that he is painting’⁷⁰. Gide, following Alfassa’s view of ‘Mr Sludge, the Medium’, moreover noted the *need* (Gide’s italics) that Browning had to express his preoccupations through the mouthpiece of unscrupulous persons⁷¹. They both agreed that ‘Sludge’ was not, ‘as seems to have been thought at the time of its first publication, a simple attack on spiritualism [...] but it is, in some ways, a general examination of the question’⁷². It is interesting to trace a different opinion which Dorothy Bussy, the sister of Lytton Strachey, had expressed to Gide in 1918: ‘“Mr Sludge” is in fact extraordinarily good: I have heard it said that, towards the end of their stay in Florence, Elizabeth was attracted to spiritualism – which he detested – and that that almost cast a shadow on their last years together. But in spite of that, Mr Sludge is in a way honest – everything that can be said in his favour is said, not only with justice but with sympathy. Do you know that other great study of dishonesty which one cannot prevent oneself placing alongside “Mr Sludge”, although it is so very different – I mean “Bishop Blougram”?’⁷³. If we turn to Chesterton, we can read, as Gide did, a perceptive analysis of Browning’s technique: ‘Browning breaks the first mask of goodness in order to break the second mask of evil, and gets to the real goodness at last; he dethrones a saint in order to humanise a scoundrel [...] There is nothing that Browning loved more [...] than the utterance of large and noble truths by the lips of mean and grotesque human beings’⁷⁴. On the other hand, Cazamian was in no doubt that when Browning painted these ‘vicious or criminal souls’ he did so with ‘lively repugnance’⁷⁵. Furthermore, asserts Gide, the reader can, of course, be invited to be complicit and to follow the poet where he leads⁷⁶. In a sense this is in fact the dramatic moment of ‘Pippa Passes’: ‘When Pippa only passes by, the unwitting and involuntary shaper of the existence of other people, our interest only detaches itself from her to attach itself, if only briefly, to that other person met by chance. If you attach the reader’s attention to nothing it will soon take leave of you’⁷⁷.

A section of ‘Sordello’ engaged Gide’s own personal erotic fancy: he quoted seven lines describing the charms of the young man in a letter to Du Bos (who may or may not have understood the reason for their having been selected), remarking disarmingly that one might be forgiven for thinking that they came from ‘Epipsychidion’⁷⁸. There are, however, other ways in which a reader like Gide can draw a text to himself and exploit it for his own purposes. The political situation in 1942 casued him to quote ‘Paracelsus’: ‘... so that at last / It all amounts to this – the sovereign proof / That we

⁷⁰ Pollard 2355 (Gide, *Journal*, 30 May 1930). But Gide also admits the possibility of ‘depersonalisation’ in Browning’s anger against Wordsworth in ‘The Lost Leader’ – a comment he most probably borrowed from an annotated edition (Pollard 2360, Gide, *Journal*, January 1936).

⁷¹ Pollard 2322 (Gide to J.Rivière, 9 March 1921).

⁷² *N.R.F.*, XCI, April 1921, p.414-6.

⁷³ Pollard 2303 (D.Bussy to Gide, 31 October 1918). Gide seems to have begun reading ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’ on 23 October 1918 (Pollard 2301).

⁷⁴ *Robert Browning*, p.189 and 192 (on Blougram and Sludge).

⁷⁵ *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, p.1130.

⁷⁶ Pollard 2308 (*Cahiers de la Petite Dame* I, p.30, 4 August-17 September 1919).

⁷⁷ Pollard 2365 (*Interviews imaginaires*, p.101, 1942).

⁷⁸ Pollard 2345 (Gide to Du Bos, 1 January 1924), ‘Sordello’, 471-6.

devote ourselves to God, is seen / In living just as though no God there were'⁷⁹, which is more a comment on his own feelings than an elucidation of the poet's meaning. He similarly quoted from 'The Last Ride Together' ('Since all my life seemed meant for fails'), reflecting on the irreparable break between himself and his wife⁸⁰. It occurred to him that two other examples might supply apposite epigraphs for his own writings. The first of these was for part two of his *Mémoires*: 'My own, confirm me! If I tread / This path back, is it not in pride / To think how little I dreamed it led / To an age so blest that, by its side, / Youth seems the waste instead?'⁸¹. In the second case, a reading of 'Death in the Desert' offered him an excellent lesson for his delinquent adolescent hero Lafcadio: 'I say that man was made to grow, nor stop'⁸². One might suppose that Gide's attitude to these texts was rather solipsistic. On reading 'The Lost Leader' in 1936 at the time of his return from the Soviet Union and his rejection of Stalinist communism, he felt that the poem had been specially written for him and for that moment. 'And,' he added, 'it is not the first time that Browning has been a support for me and offered me good counsel'⁸³.

Many of the foregoing points seem to indicate that Gide was not only an enthusiastic but also a careful reader of Browning. There are, however, some counter-indications. In 1921 he recorded reading 'The Ring and the Book' 'which I understood more easily', adding somewhat disarmingly: 'perhaps I would be less enthusiastic if I knew English perfectly. The small amount of mist which sometimes floats between the lines lends them depths for my imagination'⁸⁴. Similarly, in 1922 he again attempted 'The Ring and the Book' (or at least the section named 'Pompilia'), where the advantage, he declared, lay in the fact that not understanding the text in all its details allowed his imagination free rein⁸⁵. In 1923 he clearly had problems comprehending 'My Last Duchess'⁸⁶. Nevertheless, he continued with his reading of Browning, aloud with his friends or to himself, experiencing difficulties with 'Cleon' and 'Christmas Eve'⁸⁷. None of this lack of linguistic expertise, however, prevented him from checking Alfassa's translation of 'Sludge' which he declared not at all bad, nor yielding, albeit only for a moment, to an urgent desire to translate 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'⁸⁸. In a hammock in the Chad in 1926 Gide read some Milton ('Samson Agonistes') and some Browning ('In a Balcony'), but he found that the latter was disappointing on this second reading: 'My imagination had contributed to the mirage and had generously bespangled my lack of certainty. Now that I could understand better I was disappointed'⁸⁹. Disappointment seems to have come not with familiarity but with knowledge. 'The most tiresome thing is to sense how far an author can get,' he declared on finishing 'Pompilia'⁹⁰. Two years later he announced that although he

⁷⁹ Pollard 2366 (Gide, *Journal*, 'Feuillets' 1942), 'Paracelsus', I 186-8.

⁸⁰ Pollard 2304 (Gide, *Journal*, 25 November 1918) and 2325 (*ibid.*, I p.1134, 1921).

⁸¹ Pollard 2299 (Gide, *Journal*, 19 October 1918), 'By the Fireside' XXV. The epigraph was not used.

⁸² Pollard 2306 (*Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, 20 June 1919). It is amusing to contrast this amoral use of the quotation with Du Bos's more orthodox one (see above). 'Death in the desert', 424-7.

⁸³ Pollard 2360 (Gide, *Journal*, II p.511-2, January 1936), citing lines 13-19 and 21-24.

⁸⁴ Pollard 2327 (Gide, *Journal*, 29 November 1921).

⁸⁵ Pollard 2334 (*Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.138, 19 July 1922).

⁸⁶ Pollard 2343 (Gide to Larbaud, 31 July 1923), and 2352 (*Retour du Tchad*, 11 March 1926).

⁸⁷ Pollard 2340 (*Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.171-2, 8 February 1923).

⁸⁸ Pollard 3623 (Gide to D.Bussy, 1 March 1920), and 2354 (Gide, *Journal*, 4 November 1929).

⁸⁹ Pollard 2351 (*Retour du Tchad*, 9 March 1926).

⁹⁰ Pollard 2337 (*Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.140, 22 July 1922).

had launched himself on Browning again he was beginning to learn his ‘tricks’ and see his limitations⁹¹.

Unlike our other commentators Gide does not foreground Browning’s religious attitudes and even takes a (perverse) delight in the iconoclastic ‘Sludge’ and ‘Blougram’. But he does keep those attitudes in mind as a constant presence. Thus alongside Browning’s optimism stands love of life, and these, in Gide’s opinion, were both elements for the soul in his and in the poet’s case. ‘Browning’s *state of soul* is comparable in this regard to that of the perfect Christian’; and: ‘The whole of Browning’s works [is] seen through men’s souls, each one of which only refracts a few colours of the beam’⁹². While Du Bos was preparing his book, *Robert et Elizabeth ou la plénitude de l’amour humain* in 1935 (it was never published), Gide and he had many conversations on the subject in Paris and at Pontigny. ‘A Death in the Desert’ provided a key text⁹³, but, for Gide, it was just as important to recognise the element of abnegation which such a love might entail and which was so beautifully expressed in ‘Pompilia’⁹⁴. Gide kept Browning as a companion throughout the middle years of his life, no doubt finding that the poet echoed the deep Protestant layers of his own personality. He had already read a little of ‘Pauline’ and ‘Pippa Passes’ in 1914 and was still reading him in 1944, consulting his copy of the centenary edition (‘the glory of my library’) for the ‘fine poem’ ‘Johannes Agricola in Meditation’ in 1946⁹⁵.

It is clear that despite the difficulties which Browning’s poems present for the literate French public several individuals have tried valiantly to promote his poems in France. That they did so for different reasons is obvious: the earlier critics tended to concentrate on the relationship between the poet’s life and his works, while in the twentieth century a growing interest in narrative structures swung the focus away from transcendental love towards more technical matters, but Catholics, such as Du Bos, nevertheless tended to draw the poet towards themselves. So also did Gide: in including Browning in his pantheon alongside Blake and Dostoievsky he was signalling the importance he attached to the presence of the Devil and the divided self, which is well expressed in the unresolved form of the dramatic monologue with an implied interlocutor. Perhaps Browning’s own phrase best describes the enthusiastic promoters of his poetry in France: ‘Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a heaven for?’

⁹¹ Pollard 2346 (*Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.194, March 1924).

⁹² Pollard 2362 (Gide, *Journal*, 26 April 1938), commenting on L.Cazamian’s views, with a eulogistic appreciation of ‘Instans Tyrannus’.

⁹³ Pollard 2357 (Du Bos to Gide, 12 April 1935). References to their shared enthusiasm can be traced as early as 1918, when Du Bos sent a quotation from ‘Prospice’ (lines 21-26) together with an allusion to ‘The Last Ride Together’, whose purport was to emphasise the renewal of life after death (‘[...] shall become first a peace out of pain, / Then a light...’).

⁹⁴ Pollard 2334 (*Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame*, I p.138, 19 July 1922), ‘The Ring and the Book’, VII – ‘Pompilia’ made Gide ‘melt with tenderness’ (Pollard 2336: Gide, *Journal*, 22 July 1922).

⁹⁵ Pollard 2292 (Gide, *Journal*, 8 October 1914), 3314 (Gide to D.Bussy, 16 November 1944), and 2370 (Préfaces, p.133-5, 1946). Note his enthusiasm in a letter written in English to D.Bussy (Pollard 2298: 18 October 1918): ‘I duck and dive into Browning, with the greatest amazement. How magnificent is such a poem as “Prospice”! How piercing “Mr Sludge” [etc.]’.