Browning Born to Wordsworth

Intimations of Relatability from Recollections of Early Monstrosity

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> *If you could see the you that I see when I see you see me you'd see yourself so different believe me.*
>
> (Rollins, "Low Self-Opinion")

> *– But why would you even want to move the earth?*
> *– How can I not want it, when my entire chain of reasoning has made it hypothetically possible?*
> *– So? Non sequitur, surely?*
> *– But that is just the point: not only is the chain always stronger than its weakest link, it even binds when links are missing – especially when links are missing.*

One mark of strong writing, perhaps, is the critical relation it entertains with the readings it receives, allows for, or suffers. Wordsworth famously

stated that poems "cannot read themselves,"[1] but then Wordsworth famously stated many things that cannot just be taken as read. As a principled objection to the monumentalisation of the poem as a transcendental significator engaged in authoritative self-interpretation, the verdict may stand. Yet such an interpretative practice, intent on the auto-consolidation of the poem's self as only ever the same, is precisely not a reading: texts (provided they are strong texts) cannot interpret themselves, which is why they must read the readings they receive, allow for, or suffer.

Wordsworth's own Immortality Ode is a case in point. It is not my primary concern here, but a few remarks on its reading can plot a circuitous yet enabling passage towards the core of this essay, Robert Browning's reading of another *monstre sacré* of English Letters in his dramatic monologue "Caliban Upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island." My principal interest throughout will be the relationary rhetoric that informs both poems and their interpretations as critical documents in our rage for the relatable.

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As is the case with many of Wordsworth's more ambitious writings, the anthology-piece we now know (though perhaps no longer by heart) as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" has a complex history of composition. The poem's canonical 11-stanza version, carrying the directive title just quoted and with an epigraph from "My Heart Leaps Up," was published in 1815, some eight years after its first publication under the starker title "Ode," and with an epigraph from Vergil's *Eclogues* ("Paulo maiora canamus"). It had been completed in substantially this form by March 1804, but the first four stanzas, ending on the ringing questions "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/ Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (ll.56-57), were already written in March 1802. Wordsworth recited these stanzas to Coleridge in early April of that year and Coleridge promptly responded in his verse epistle "A Letter

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[1] "Preface to Poems (1815)" (Wordsworth 1989: 629). The fact that Wordsworth's "read" should be read as "recite" is appropriate in ways I shall not further explore here.

to . . .," which was published, after considerable revision and condensation, as "Dejection: An Ode" exactly half a year later, on Wordsworth's wedding-day, October 4th. Wordsworth's later extension of his poem, then, can in its turn be read as a response to Coleridge's reading – which is to say that Coleridge's Ode effectively transformed Wordsworth's culminating questions of 1802 into the opening movements of a fully-fledged alternative ode rehearsing and, after a fashion, answering these questions. In 1843, Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick that "[t]o the attentive and competent reader the whole [of the definitive Ode] sufficiently explains itself" (1985: 428), but bearing in mind this whole's compositional history, it would be more accurate to say that it tries to explain the whole of the four 1802 stanza's by turning them into a part of the 1804 whole.

As we cannot go into the detail of this intricate exchange here,[2] I only want to insist for a moment on the decisive modulation of the initial stanzas' questioning finish into the definitive Ode's apparently confident genealogical answer. The 1802 stanzas start out by remembering "a time when meadow, grove, and stream/ The earth, and every common sight,/ To me did seem/ Apparelled in celestial light" (ll.1-4).[3] In the "now," even as the speaker still registers the beauty of things, this splendour is a thing of the past: "Turn wheresoe'er I may,/ By night or day,/ The things which I have seen, I now can see no more." (ll.7-9) The melancholy attending this loss, however, is apparently lifted in a "timely utterance" (l.23), further unspecified, granting the speaker the strength to ward off grief on "[t]his sweet May-morning" (l.44) and to enjoy the abundant vitality surrounding him – "I feel – I feel it all" (l.41) – "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!" (l.50)

Fifty lines is a good, round number, and in the absence of any obvious formal requirements to further extend the poem, this final exclamation,

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[2] For some instructive comments in this connection, see Gill 1990: 200-6, 228 and Servotte 1992: 45-7.

[3] Unless indicated otherwise, all Wordsworth quotations in this essay are from Stephen Gill's Oxford Authors edition. Line numbers for the Ode consequently refer to the first published version of 1807.

carrying as it emphatically does the sense of an ending proper to moments of spiritual recovery, could have been a perfect (though hardly critically satisfactory) finish. Yet already in the first version, Wordsworth adds a singular retraction returning the poem to the mild despondency registered in its first half:

> I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!
> – But there's a Tree, of many one,
> A single Field which I have looked upon,
> Both of them speak of something that is gone:
> The Pansy at my feet
> Doth the same tale repeat:
> Whither is fled the visonary gleam?
> Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (ll.50-57)

As indicated above, it was only after Coleridge's response (which, to put it all too crudely, can be read as something like: the gleam has not exactly fled, for it was never even there in the first place, not before you put it there: "we receive but what we give,/ And in our life alone does Nature live" ["Dejection: An Ode," ll.47-48]) that Wordsworth began to rehearse these questions. The seven stanzas that "completed" the poem in 1804 indeed hold up something of an answer, albeit an answer that adjusts the perspective of the initial question: it is not the visionary gleam that has fled somewhere; it is we who have progressively (or regressively) fallen away from its glory from the moment of our birth:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (ll.58-66)

Upon which the poem piously abandons itself to a passionate development of this variation on a neo-Platonic theme. The specific – and

by no means straightforward – nature of this further development need not concern us here. Instead, what I wish to retain is Wordsworth's strategic translation of the "time" in the opening lines of the poem – a "time" specified only as preceding the "now" when he "knows" that "there hath past away a glory from the earth" (l.18) – into, specifically, the time of "infancy." The obvious attractiveness of this specification is that it triggers a reassuringly intelligible narrative of growth, whereby the "fading" of the "vision splendid" (l.73) is understood as a corollary of a process of *Bildung* culminating in the "sober" (l.197) lucidity of "the philosophic mind" (l.185). The further advantage of this ontogenetic pattern is that it posits a solid ground on which the fading of the gleam can be recorded: the identity of the Man's body with that of the blessed Babe trailing clouds of glory ensures the lasting inscription of this glory and renders it accessible to, as the final title states, recollection. "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?": We left it behind – that is: *we* left it behind, *I* left it behind, and to the extent that I can recollect who I was in an identity encompassing my history, I can commemorate and preserve it for the day when I return to my source. We recollect but what we have received:

> What though the radiance which was once so bright
> Be now for ever taken from my sight,
> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind,
> In the primal sympathy
> Which having been must ever be
> (ll.178-85)

Hence: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. *Q.E.D.*

And yet. In the notes compiled by Isabella Fenwick in 1843, Wordsworth tries to answer some reservations readers of the Ode had registered:

> To that dream-like vividness and splendour which invests objects of sight in childhood every one, I believe, if he

> would look back, could bear testimony, and I need not dwell upon it here – but having in the Poem regarded it as presumptive evidence of a prior state of existence, I think it right to protest against a conclusion, which has given pain to some good and pious persons that I meant to inculcate such a belief. It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith as more than an element in our instincts of immortality. But let us bear in mind that, tho' the idea is not advanced in revelation, there is nothing there to contradict it, and the fall of Man presents an analogy in its favor. Accordingly, a preexistent state has entered into the popular creeds of many nations, and among all persons acquainted with classic literature is known as an ingredient in Platonic philosophy. Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind? Having to wield some of its elements when I was impelled to write this Poem on the 'Immortality of the soul' I took hold of the notion of preexistence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet. (Wordsworth 1985: 428)

This authoritative comment is often cited as evidence of Wordsworth's questionable deference to orthodoxy in his old age – an attempt to make amends for the Ode's deviant Platonic inversion of the Pauline line in 1 Corinthians 14:11, but this is to overlook the passage's opening appeal to the self-evidence of the presumptive evidence itself: the self-evidence of our pre-existence not as Immortal Soul but, precisely, as a child whose primal sympathy with all that is we can recollect. In this imperious appeal to the allegedly obvious, Wordsworth effectively erases the tracks of his translation of the 1802 stanzas into the ontogenetic narrative of the 1804 sequence. Put more simply: perhaps the true fulcrum here is not any Platonic notion stored in our collective memory but the specific imposition of our childhood as a source of meaning – a source of which we are the river underway to the "immortal sea" (l.163).

The pattern involved here – epitomised in the bull "I was a fine child, but they changed me" – is that of a saving sense of identity achieved through the postulate of a genetic continuity between, in Coleridge's terms, present "personal identity – *Ego contemplans*" on the one hand, and, on the other, "the visual image or object by which the mind represents to itself its past condition, or rather, its personal identity under the form in which it imagined itself previously to have existed. – Ego contemplatus" (72-73).[4] That Wordsworth was sensitive to the slightly perverse critical defamiliarisation of this "natural" pattern of personal identity persistent through time is subtly suggested in the epigraph from his own "My Heart Leaps Up" which he placed over the 1815 version of the Ode:

> The Child is Father of the Man;
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety.

You wish. The desire for a participation in this legitimating bond is indeed recognised *as* desire, as a wish rather than as the apparent truism of identity through time. The Child is *Father* of the Man: as Joyce might have said of such male bonding, "Paternity is a legal fiction" – an imposition of logic and coherence on the basis of an absurd assumption that is as fictional as is the neo-Platonic doctrine of gradual amnesia. Through the patently counterfactual *hysteron proteron* of his epigraph, Wordsworth foregrounds the anxious appropriation of fact into meaningful sequence that interests us here: the genealogical invention of an entity as the explanatory origin of a present condition, an entity whose fictional nature as explanatory origin is masked by an *implicit* appeal to material evidence – in this case, flesh and bones and sensory organs that persist through time and are figured, on the basis of this very persistence, as undeniable evidence of what is precisely *not* evident.

The further pertinence of the childhood-fulcrum to our argument here is its explicit function as a social cement. As a space of splendid vision to

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[4] For an excellent reflection on the purport of this pattern for the Ode, Wordsworth and Romantic thought, see Christensen 1994: 460ff. On the intimately related issue of Wordsworth's characteristic attempts to prefigure his own death, see de Man 1993: 81ff.

which "everyone, [...] if he would look back, could bear testimony," it serves as a foundational topos for human (or at least male) society – making the Ode into a veritable *Discourse on the Origin of Similarity*.[5] Things are speeding up. The social extension of the argument to the postulate of a shared ontogenetic narrative of nativity can hardly avoid triggering a further massive expansion of the genetic imperative, allowing us to raise the stakes by moving backwards towards the birth of the species. The question whether we must or indeed even can bind ourselves with this chain of reasoning is what this essay is about.

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In the Romantic period, natural science could still be fun.

(David Knight, "Romanticism and the Sciences")

In his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* Rousseau justifies his notorious dismissal of factual evidence by taking recourse to an instructive analogy:

> Il ne faut pas prendre les Recherches, dans lesquelles on peut entrer sur ce Sujet, pour des vérités historiques, mais seulement pour des raisonnemens hypothétiques et conditionnels; plus propres à éclaircir la Nature des choses qu'à montrer la véritable origine, et semblables à ceux que font tous les jours nos Physiciens sur la formation du Monde. (132-33)

As Jean Starobinski points out in his editorial notes, for Rousseau's 1755 French reader the reference here is to works such as Buffon's *Théorie de la Terre* and Maupertuis' *Essai de Cosmologie*. But some hundred years later, in the wake of geological science's principled (though not therefore always

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[5] In this connection, it is fitting that Wordsworth should have explicitly characterised the gradual socialisation of the growing child, the "little Actor" (l.102), as a mimetic imperative: "As if his whole vocation/ Were endless imitation." (ll.106-07)

substantiated) insistence on the truth of its historical evidence, the analogy backfires and a very real monster slouches towards the hypothetical State of Nature. Enter Caliban – or perhaps not quite.

It is the hottest time of the day on the island. Prospero and Miranda are asleep and Caliban, who should be "drudg[ing] at their task" (l.21)[6] is "cheat[ing] the pair" (l.22), sprawling "flat on his belly" (l.2) in the "cool slush" (l.4) of his cave, looking out over the sea and "talk[ing] to his own self" (l.15), "Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech." (l.23) The theme of his soliloquy is "that other, whom his dam [Sycorax] called God" (l.16): Setebos. Caliban knows that talking about Setebos is forbidden, yet he feels safe to "speak [...] his mind" (l.268) under the triple protection of his cave, the heat (Setebos dwells in the cold) and the third person which, like Caesar, he applies to himself throughout his monologue (give or take a few significant exceptions). From this presumptive point of safety, Caliban speculates on Setebos's motives in creating the world and its creatures. The organising principle that powerfully punctuates this exercise is analogy: throughout, the logic of Caliban's catechism is "So He." Setebos has created the world and its creatures in a spirit of resentment: living in eternal cold like a fish in an icy stream, He longs for, and in this longing creates, a warmth He cannot live in; unable to be what He is not, like a Caliban wishing he was a bird, He creates "what Himself would fain, in a manner, be" (l.62); Himself subordinate to a higher "something" (l.129) which Caliban calls the "Quiet" (l.137), He makes a "bauble-world" (l.147) of which He is lord and master, just like Caliban imitates Prospero, etc. On the basis of this understanding of the dynamics of creation, Caliban then sketches a rule to live by: if Setebos created the world in a spirit of vicarious pleasure, endowing what He is not with what He Himself lacks, "the best way to escape His ire/ Is, not to seem too happy" (l.257), giving Him the impression that life is hard and that His creature Caliban envies Him more than He envies him. Perhaps, Caliban continues, such a charade may even lull Setebos to terminal sleep, but as he murmurs this blasphemous conclusion, clouds slide across the sun and Caliban sees a raven whom he suspects is Setebos's spy. Fearing divine punishment, he prostrates himself and promises penitence:

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[6] Quotations from Browning are taken from Kenyon's Centenary edition.

> His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him!
> Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!
> 'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip;
> Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
> One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape! (ll.291-95)

"so He" (l.43), "So He" (l.97), "so He" (l.108), "So He" (l.126), "so He" (l.169), "so He" (l.199), "So He" (l.240) – "so he may 'scape!" (l.295) So?

Ever since its first publication in *Dramatis Personae* in 1864, this question has occupied Browning's readers. Whether or not Caliban has succeeded in escaping Setebos's wrath, he certainly seems to have escaped decisive critical classification. If in Wordsworth's Ode the child in its primal sympathy with divine splendour is a pre-eminently enabling mediating figure precisely by virtue of its obvious (though highly problematic) appeal to a shared sense of saving incorporation, Browning's monster seems to incarnate no such immediate pertinence. Wordsworth's blessed babe figures the material fact of our birth into a fictional fulcrum on which we may hope to lean as we try to move our mind towards some kind of resolution; Browning's Caliban just seems to figure as a fiction, intent only on letting its rank tongue blossom into impertinent speech.

As if there could ever be a pure as if: clearly, "Caliban Upon Setebos" also calls out for pertinence, and such pertinence has been abundantly granted – which is not to say that the call did not fall on deaf ears. Very broadly speaking, all the interpretations of the poem I have come across have sought to solve the riddle of Caliban by identifying him as some type of transitional creature, an incarnation of the missing link, or as a parodic figure conceived as a vehicle for "a profound criticism of anthropomorphically believing humanity as Browning and as we have known it" (Maclean 1987: 9). My argument here will not be that of these Caliban is both at once – that is in fact the understanding most of these interpretations arrive at (see e.g. Gridley 1972: 114-17 and Jack 1973: 263-68) – but rather that he is indeed at once both yet also, and crucially, neither. This I take to be the poem's resistance to its hermeneutic recuperation and my intention in the following pages is to recognise this resistance by considering more closely some representative responses to Browning's text.

> *Erasmus joked that Plato thought 'our* "necessary ideas *[of good and evil]" arise from the pre-existence of the soul' – and that they 'are not derivable from experience' – which Darwin capped by adding 'read monkeys for preexistence [of the soul].'*
>
> (Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin*)

> *It has been an inept conception of ancient and also recent Philosophy of Nature to regard the progression and transition of one natural form and sphere into a higher as an outwardly-actual production which, however, to be made* clearer, *is relegated to the* obscurity *of the past. [...] A thinking consideration must reject such nebulous, at bottom, sensuous ideas, as in particular the so-called* origination, *for example, of plants and animals from water, and the* origination *of the more highly developed animal organisms from the lower, and so on. [...] It is a completely empty thought to represent species as developing successively, one after the other, in time. Chronological difference has no interest whatever for thought.*
>
> (Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, § 249)

Browning probably began composing Caliban's monologue in 1859 and his readers have been quick to envelop the poem in the mythical aura of that date. 1859 is, after all, the year in which Darwin finally published *The Origin of Species*, and while the divisive question of the descent of Man did not quite make it in these pages yet, the figure of the ancestral monkey and its monstrous progeny already loomed large. What must more specifically interest us here is the curious preferential pattern in which this issue was repeatedly cast, most famously perhaps in the titanic clash between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley at Oxford in 1860. In the course of this notorious polemic, the anti-Darwinian Bishop

asked Huxley whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed descent from an ape, to which Huxley is claimed to have offered the devastating answer that he would rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather than a man who abuses his talent and authority by "introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion."[7] Some ten years later, in the famous closing paragraphs of *The Descent of Man*, Darwin presented his own variation on this comparative theme by stating that he would as soon be descended from monkeys and baboons – creatures he credited with acts of heroism and compassion – as from savages such as those inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego whose delight in torture, bloody sacrifices, infanticide, wife-enslavement, indecency and "grossest superstitions" he had observed with horror during his voyage on the Beagle (1899: 634).

The semi-conscious irony in these two venerable chestnuts of Darwinian lore is, of course, that evolutionary processes are superbly indifferent to whatever Messrs. Huxley and Darwin may or may not prefer and that, at the end of the day (i.e. now), we are all related to monkeys, savages and – *horresco referens* – Bishop Wilberforces. What this irony masks is the deeply distressing implication of maximised relatedness – the sense that, as the final sentence of the *Descent* has it, "Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin" (634), that every human being is riddled with material connections that stubbornly resist the kind of reassuring narrative that Wordsworth's Ode read into our bodies. Not in utter nakedness indeed: what hair we have left links us to the beast we descend from (cf. Darwin 1899: 57). Something of this distress indeed shines through in the phrasing of Darwin's observation that "[h]e who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins" (Darwin 1899: 634) – the point being the telling elision of the logically inevitable "also" between the subject and the verb of the closing clause: *that* is the implication we are indeed *forced* to acknowledge – we are all family: baboon, Bishop, barbarian.

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[7] For an entertaining reconstruction of this famous exchange between Soapy Sam and Darwin's Bulldog and of the mythopoeic modulations it has received, see Gould 1992: 385-401. Further context can be found in Desmond 1994: 276ff.

Or are we? And if we are, what does this mean? How do we come to terms with this anxiety of connection, this disturbing sense of material participation, this pathos fed by savage blood in our veins? Most classically: How do we determine where the animal turns barbarian and the barbarian man (of God), given that God Himself, who used to be in charge of these comforting demarcations, has been ruled out of court? Hegel decreed that such questions of chronological difference have "no interest whatever for thought" (20), but they certainly had a profound interest for the fevered imagination of Darwin's contemporaries. Darwin himself regally ruled that the impossibility to fix any "definite point" as the transition between the pre-human and the human was "a matter of very little importance" (Darwin 1899: 184),[8] yet what is scientifically – or indeed dialectically – of very little importance is often precisely what will not go away,[9] and to many readers of "Caliban Upon Setebos" Browning brings a measure of relief for this anxiety. As a direct recourse to the Creator has become problematic, the interest of Browning's response, as understood by these readers, is that it addresses the problem of relatedness precisely by explaining the emergence of the very notion of God as an explanatory force – by readmitting God into court as evidence rather than as judge, "using the poem to bring Darwin's theory of evolution to the test" (Melchiori 1992: 96), the test of relatability.

Darwin's marked outrage at the savage Fuegians' "grossest superstitions" bespeaks the implicit assumption that a rudimentary sense of religion

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[8] A verdict echoed by one of his most prominent spokesmen in our time, Richard Dawkins, who suggests that "there is a good case for not even trying to pin down the precise identity of ancestors" (284).

[9] One of the clearest contemporary expressions of science's impotence to adequately address the questions generated by its own findings remains Matthew Arnold's 1882 "Literature and Science" – as in the following passage: "for the generality of men [...], when they have duly taken in [Mr. Darwin's famous proposition] that their ancestor was 'a hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits,' there will be found to arise an invincible desire to relate this proposition to the sense in us for conduct, and the sense in us for beauty. But this the men of science will not do for us, and will hardly even profess to do." (1958: 495)

(retrospectively recognised as superstition) is a crucial feature in the transition from the animal to the human. From an evolutionary perspective, this means that what has to be accounted for is the development of this religious sentiment, and Huxley, for one, seems to have thought that this is exactly what Browning had achieved: "a scientific representation of the development of such [religious] ideas in primitive man" (quoted in Mermin 1992: 203). Huxley's interpretation has been implicitly or explicitly echoed ever since in the many commentaries on Caliban that seek to place him as an imaginative incarnation of the missing link. A relatively recent representative instance of this tradition is John Howard's "Caliban's Mind," and in the following pages I shall consider Howard's argument in some detail – not because his is a particularly good or bad account of the poem, but because his interpretive strategy allows us to understand more clearly the governing assumptions of any interpretation that proposes to name Caliban as the missing link.

Howard understands the poem as "a clear picture of [...] a primitive subhuman who contemplates God in the only way he can" (225), yet after some minimal critical development, this picture turns out to be badly focussed. Browning, so the argument goes, "created a character who represents something early and undeveloped, something which is far back in the evolutionary scale" (227), in an endeavour "to capture the limitations of the subhuman mind when confronted with religious speculation" (224) – in other words, the missing link caught in the proto-religious act of linking, explaining himself to himself by imposing a rudimentary coherence on his situated existence. The binding principles in this worldview are "spite, envy, vexing and propitiation" (233), a powerplay of bleak cruelty Caliban has "derived from the rude forces of the nature that he inhabits" (229). It is this simple-minded logic of direct derivation that allegedly captures "the limitations of the subhuman mind" in its inability to attain the "abstract knowledge" proper to "the fully developed human" (230). Browning's enactment of the absence of such knowledge in his transitional monster would thus implicitly credit us, "fully developed humans," with the power of abstraction that can then figure as our saving distinction from our savage ancestry and all is well with the world.

But what exactly is this "abstract knowledge"? Caliban's "point of view," Howard argues, is that of "a perceptive but unscientific mind" (227), the mind of a subhuman who understands all that is in a spirit of resentment and cruelty derived from the "rude forces" of his "fierce world" (229). The implication might be that a higher scientific awareness would somehow yield an abstract knowledge articulating a coherent vision that would be more comforting. If our access to abstraction already offers us a reassuring formal distinction from the subhuman, this narrative still requires some more substantial development – yet faced with such substantial vision as has been forthcoming from evolutionary science, the picture turns from injury to insult. If Caliban's world is resentful and cruel, the logic read into life by Darwinian science is one of blind indifference, an affront not just to our desire for a salvational dynamic but, more painfully, to our narcissistic yearning for any kind of motivated development in which we can recognise ourselves as meaningfully special.[10] Being possessed by this knowledge is not likely to assuage the anxiety of material connection Browning's "scientific" representation of subhuman thought is supposed to have addressed.

It is no accident, then, that Howard – whose reading of Caliban as a subhuman missing link is, as suggested, fairly representative – should shy away from this bleak conclusion in a momentous shift of perspective. In a first highly significant preparatory move, Caliban's subhuman mind is reread as the mind of a child: "Like the child, he reads direct causes into the effects, thus inferring the nature of the Creator in the only way he can understand him. Like the child, he sees simple, direct relationships, not scientific distinctions," and, like the child, he only "understands by simple analogy" (232). Thus Caliban's cruel reasoning, the scientific representation of which could hardly be said to generate a comforting phylogenetic narrative, is partly redeemed on the basis of its putative analogy with a child's analogical thought, and lest this return to a less disturbing ontogenetic *Bildungsgeschichte* be judged insufficient, Howard adds one more predictable and definitive turn:

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[10] On Freud's famous characterisation of Darwinian science as a second blow to humanity's self-image, see Beer 1985: 12. Further seminal thoughts on the scientific self-erasure attendant on this blow can be found in Levine 1993.

> The one essential element which Caliban cannot deduce about God is his loving nature. [...] Caliban has clearly found the power and intelligence of crafty Setebos, by looking at the 'work i'the world,' but he cannot find the good. Revelation is necessary for that, and Caliban, being something primitive and below humanity, cannot receive it. (232)

With one imperious stroke, the question raised by evolutionary science is spirited away: the "abstract knowledge" Caliban cannot attain turns out to be not the coherent pattern of scientific distinction but the assurance of divine love that can be "deduced" by humanity which has "received" it from God in the visionary gleam of Revelation. We deduce but what we have received. The missing-link-reading starts out by casting Browning's Caliban as a scientific representation of subhuman thought intent on an enabling identification of the savage blood linking us to our history and thus on a consolidation of our distinction as fully developed humans; to put it more defensively, the poem is understood as a diagnostic enterprise committed to a responsible representation that can ward off the threat of a creeping migration of primitive matter even as it recognises the scientific fact of our participation in that matter. Suddenly, however, this "clear picture" is miraculously developed into a fundamentally non-scientific, indeed *radically* abstract and overexposed snapshot of salvational history. The material implication of man in his monstrous origin is cunningly transsubstantiated through divine intercession and all is well with the world. The indelible stamp has been overwritten, the missing link is lost again.[11]

Yet was Browning's Caliban ever a missing link in the first place? Who put him in that place? Not Browning's poem: all we are given is Caliban's

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[11] This is as good a place as any to underscore that such a miraculous transmutation need not as blatantly abandon the scientific frame as is the case here. Indeed, secular versions of the same salvational relation were prominent in the Darwinian camp as well, most notably for our purposes in Huxley's modulation of evolution into an emancipatory dynamic (cf. Desmond and Moore 1992: 508). Here, too, man's descent from a "bestial savage" (508) is no sooner admitted than it is erased in an edifying narrative of inexorable progress..

analogical catechism fuelled by his acute observation of the world around him and framed by two square-bracketed passages, also spoken by Caliban, the first of which sets the stage while the second ends Caliban's disquisition with his attempts to escape the divine wrath he fears he has incurred. John Woolford has suggested that these square-bracketed passages indicate an "editorial intervention fragment[ing] the internally unbroken utterance of [the] speaker into ranked 'levels'" (161), but what is most striking is that this 'ranking' in no way establishes an authorial connection between Caliban's "rank tongue" and the human eyes that read him. According to Howard, "Browning takes pains to fix [Caliban] somewhere below man in [the] great hierarchy" (231), but even in these editorial framing passages, where such fixing would be eminently possible, that is precisely what does not happen: Browning does *not* say "not in utter hairlessness but trailing clouds of monstrosity do we come." Neither does he deny it.

"Caliban Upon Setebos" is certainly not the strongest of poems, but it does display considerable critical power in its emphatic foregrounding of the linkthink it has suffered from its readers. Not only is the poem's speaker obsessively engaged in an attempt to link all that he so acutely senses in a Great – if Dispiriting – Chain of Being; not only does the author emphatically abstain from explicitly inserting his speaker in such a chain; the poem also conspicuously stages the very enterprise of linking in such a way that it prefigures the fallacies of linkthink it could hardly hope to escape. One recent blatant misreading of the poem may help to briefly illustrate the excessive and significant obviousness of this prefigurating strategy.

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> *Analogy would lead me one step farther, namely, to the belief that all animals and plants are descended from some one prototype. But analogy may be a deceitful guide*
>
> (Darwin, *The Origin of Species)*

> *... and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.*
>
> (Psalms 50:23)

In their impressively researched "cultural history" of Shakespeare's Caliban, Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan also devote a page to Browning's Caliban, whom they characterise as "an amphibian – half man, half fish – who lives on the margins of humanity but reveals essential human traits such as selfishness and self-deception." (109) For this description of Caliban as an amphibian missing link, they rely on a passage that "summarizes Browning's conception of Shakespeare's fishlike monster" (110)

> 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. (ll.163-66)

What is wrong with this conception of Caliban is that it is no such thing. Nowhere in the poem is Caliban credited with fishy features: true, he sprawls in the cool slush of his cave, but he does so "With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin" (l.3) and kicking "both feet" (l.4); he has two arms (l.6), a "round mouth" (l.125), a "scalp" (l.175), thumbs (l.227), fingers (l.271), teeth and lips (l.293). That is all we know of Caliban's physique. The passage quoted by Vaughan and Vaughan in fact figures as part of Caliban's account of Setebos's creating the world and its creatures by way of compensation for His own subordination to "the Quiet" – a practice Caliban characteristically understands by analogy with his own imitations of Prospero: Caliban has made himself a grimoir, a magic wand and an enchanter's robe; he keeps a "four-legged serpent" (l.158) and "saith she is Miranda and my wife" (l.160); "for his Ariel" he keeps "a tall pouch-bill crane" (l.161); and the web-footed creature Vaughan and Vaughan call Caliban in fact is Caliban's Caliban, a poor sea-beast he has enslaved just as Prospero enslaved him: "'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,/ Taketh his mirth with make-believes: so He." (ll.168-69)

Vaughan and Vaughan's mistake may be marginal but it is instructive in that it foregrounds the poem's peculiar pronominal patterns, its constant permutation of shifters in hierarchical sequences punctuated by Caliban's Caesarean self-reference: the "he" (l.163) they take to be Prospero is Caliban, the "him" (l.165) they take to be Caliban is the sea-beast. It is important to stress that this pattern is peculiar but by no means undecidable: indeed, on any attentive reading the poem's shifters cannot fail to fall into place. Yet they only do so when the reading observes the mechanical regularity that obtains within the text's frame, and the significance of Vaughan and Vaughan's mistake is that they disturb this regularity precisely by trying to link up Caliban in a chain that exceeds the frame of the fiction. Or, more accurately, in a double chain: a narrative of cultural history – "Caliban's odyssey," as their final chapter has it – and a narrative of natural history embedded within this cultural lineage – the narrative also imposed on the poem by Huxley and Howard featuring Caliban as the missing link (more specifically, as Darwin's hypothetical aquatic ancestor of man[12] – hence the erroneous insistence on Caliban's "amphibian" features).

It would appear, then, that Caliban's conspicuous pronominal-analogical antics indeed ironically prefigure and pre-empt the numerous interpretations that have sought to place him as the missing link. Vaughan and Vaughan somewhat carelessly stumble into the textual trap,[13] but Howard's far more sophisticated interpretation ultimately makes the same mistake by inserting Caliban into a chain of its own making. Clearly, Howard can tell his "he"'s from his "he"'s – yet his persistent attempts to render the poem's meaning in terms of our "we" are governed by the same

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[12] A reading "made more explicit," as Vaughan and Vaughan note (1991: 110), in Daniel Wilson's 1873 *Caliban: The Missing Link*.

[13] That Vaughan and Vaughan are not primarily intent on an attentive reading of Browning partly excuses them. The same cannot be said for Joseph Bristow, whose reconstruction of Browning's models of understanding is marred by his misreading Caliban's fanciful impersonation of his flute's disrespectul reference to "his great round mouth" (l.125) as Caliban's "imagining Setebos with his 'great round mouth'" (123). The fact that even Browning scholars are confused by Caliban's shifters further justifies our insistence on the importance of this level of the letter.

pronominal licence that powers Vaughan and Vaughan's, and indeed Caliban's, clasificatory enterprise. Next to these missing-link-interpretations, however, there is an alternative standard interpretation of Browning's poem that focusses explicitly on Caliban's pronominal analogisms and thus might seem to avoid these pitfalls. (It doesn't.)

According to this second canonical interpretation, the key to the poem has nothing to do with Caliban's place in the evolutionary scale but must instead be sought in its subtitle, "Natural Theology in the Island," and in its epigraph, taken from Psalm 50, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself." Michael Timko, a representative exponent of this interpretation, rightly points out, in explicit opposition to Howard, that "there is nothing to show that the poem is necessarily directly connected with Darwinism" (142), and, taking his cue from the subtitle, proposes instead to read the monologue as a topical satire on the kind of "scientific" religious speculation inspired by works like Joseph Butler's 1736 *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* and William Paley's 1802 *Natural Theology* – speculations in which theological truth is made "dependen[t] on analogy" consolidated by "constant references to empirical proof" (145) rather than to divine Revelation.[14] For Timko, Caliban is a "rationalist" (142) "presenting a highly conventional, orthodox view of theology, one supplied and advocated by such staunch churchmen as Butler and Paley" (143), and Browning invented him as a caricaturesque vehicle for his "ideas on the dangers of too much dependence on intellect and reason in matters of faith" (142), thereby fashioning his dramatic monologue as "poetic proof of his strong faith" (150).

Now, it seems quite possible that Browning indeed had something like this in mind – the directive subtitle suggests as much and, as Timko convincingly points out, such an interpretation could be comfortably confirmed with reference to various other works in "the canon of Browning's 'religious' poetry" (143). The only problem is that the poem's

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[14] Like the missing-link-interpretation, this interpretation too had already been duly registered by Browning's contemporaries. See e.g. Litzinger and Smalley 1970: 220.

speaker is patently *not* a "staunch churchman" advocating orthodox natural theology, as Timko indeed almost recognises (half-contradicting his previous rejection of references to Caliban's "place in the evolutionary scale" [142]) when he states that "[t]o see Caliban only as a primitive subhuman is to take the poem much too literally" (143) – implying that, read literally, Caliban is at least also something other than an orthodox defender of natural theology, something of a missing link. The predictable point we must make here is that to interpret Caliban as a satirical version or monstrous antetype of Butler or Paley requires taking massive recourse to yet another variation on Caliban's pronominal-analogical permutations – even while Timko's intent is precisely to demonstrate that Browning's poem is a satire on analogical reason itself. Let me try to illustrate this by considering in some more detail Timko's central claim that "[t]he basic questions in the poem are those concerning the nature of God, His relationship to human beings, and His method of revealing Himself to these human beings." (146)

The only suggestions "in" the poem that these are indeed its "basic questions" occur in the subtitle and the epigraph, yet these can hardly be called straightforward clues to Caliban's soliloquy. Earlier on in his essay, Timko briefly sketches the continuing importance of natural theology in Browning's time, characterising its mid-Victorian version in the *Bridgewater Treatises*, with Elie Halévy, as an attempt "to reconcile Christian doctrine with the conclusions of modern physiology" and concluding that "[a]s the epigraph to the poem (*Psalms*, 50:21, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself") indicates, Browning knew exactly where the real danger to his emotional gnosticism lay." (145) Timko does not deem it necessary to specify exactly what this means, but given that Browning's "emotional gnosticism" involves a "skeptical view of human knowledge" (143), the implication must be that natural theology is to be dismissed because it fashions God in the image of (hu)man (knowledge). This, however, raises some considerable problems. First, if Timko wants us to understand that Caliban, as a natural theologian, is guilty by implication of thinking that (his) God is altogether such a one as himself, the difficulty is that that is exactly what Caliban does not think. To Caliban's mind, his very existence is dependent on his not being altogether like Setebos, who made him, precisely, as "what Himself would fain, in a manner, be" (l.62). True, this desire itself is

projected by Caliban onto Setebos by analogy with Caliban's own desire to be what he is not, but this imposition of identity on the basis of a shared desire for difference already indicates that matters are rather more complex than Timko's blanket judgement allows for. Yet the pattern becomes more interestingly complex when we recover the context of the epigraph: for the "thou" God addresses in verse 21 from Psalm 50 is not any general pronominal stand-in for "man" but quite specifically names "the wicked" (50: 16), guilty of all kinds of evil: "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes." (50: 21) God's wrath, then, descends not so much on "man" for having thought of God as similar to himself but, with important precision, on the wicked who think God, too, walks their wicked ways. God's "saints," "those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (50: 5), are pointedly not included in the "thou" denounced in verse 21 – their erring is altogether of a different kind.

It appears, then, that Timko's confident understanding of the epigraph as a clear denunciation of natural theology's attempt to understand God in analogy with man is predicated on a misread pronoun. Whatever else the epigraph may mean, as a Bible-thumper's key to the poem it picks more locks than Timko's hermeneutic desire bargained for.[15] For even if we accept, for the sake of argument, that the epigraph was intended by Browning as a forceful (though unfelicitously chosen) Biblical curse on the heads of all natural theologians, it still is not clear how this can be unambiguously fed into the poem. For (I must return to my wearying rhetorical question) was Caliban ever a natural theologian, let alone a human being, in the first place? Who put him in that place? Timko argues that the poem's basic questions concern the nature and relation of God and man and that

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[15] Just to give one further instance: both F.G. Kenyon (in his edition of the *Works*, xxxii) and Barbara Melchiori argue that the reference to Psalm 50 in fact supports the missing-link-interpretation of the poem Timko seeks to invalidate with this same reference. The fact that Melchiori's suggestion also makes Caliban "a counterpart of [...] the Jews at a certain part of their development as a race" (98) is perhaps unintended but significantly there.

> Caliban, who is pondering these questions, reasons, like Butler and Paley, inductively. He is the complete Baconian. Limited to his senses (unlike man, Browning would stress), he depends on them, just as Butler and Paley, while admitting that man is not limited to his senses, do. (146)

In the space of three sentences, we are treated to a display of substitutive fireworks that might even put Caliban himself to shame: Caliban ponders the relation of man (which he is not) and God and he does this like the men of God Butler and Paley even while, unlike man, as Browning would say (but does not), he is limited to his senses and depends on them just like the men of God Butler and Paley who admit nonetheless that they are not limited to them. Just who is guilty of unlawful analogical reasoning here? As if in response to this question, Timko immediately continues by saying that "Caliban is always consistent, always resorting to analogies; 'so He' is his favourite expression. He also, like Butler and Paley, is aware of..." – never mind what he of the "so He" is also aware of just like those who are like him: Timko is always consistent, always resorting to analogies; "like Butler and Paley" – or even "so they, Butler and Paley" (148) – is his favourite expression. The title of his essay, "Browning upon Butler," is either a masterful stroke of self-irony or conclusive evidence of his damaging blindness to the analogical nature of his reduction of the poem to a rejection of natural analogy.

None of this is to say, however, that we should not mind what Timko has to say, as I have just brutally suggested. Timko's interpretation is not simply wrong. On the contrary, like Howard's and, to a lesser extent, Vaughan and Vaughan's, it is simply correct, precisely in the sense that it mimetically responds to the poem's obsessive foregrounding of analogical-pronominal permutation. To interpret Caliban as a "perceptive but unscientific" creature (Howard 1966: 227) incarnating "the limitations of the subhuman mind" (224), or, on the contrary, as a "spokesman, and a very shrewd one, for what many would consider a highly developed intellectual point of view" (Timko 1965: 143) ultimately incarnating the "reduction to absurdity" (147) of "the rational, scientific approach to problems" (143) proposed in this "natural reasoning" (147), is in both cases to inscribe him in just the kind of "geneanological" narrative whose

condition of possibility is critically challenged in the text of Browning's poem. As said, this challenge takes shape in the poem's excessive performance of analogical and pronominal permutations that eminently make sense in the frame of its fiction but never allow for a transfer to the "real" narrrative its readers require. Indeed, the frustration any reading of "Caliban Upon Setebos" is bound to encounter not only resides in the fact that it is by no means clear what the poem *is* "really" about, it ultimately derives from the understanding that this lack of recognisable, relatable pertinence is itself the poem's impertinent point. Such rank impertinence is hard to swallow: in fact, it can only be rejected, but there are different ways to get caught up in this apotropaic gesture.

***

A soul shall draw from out the vast
And strike his being into bounds,

And moved through life of lower phase,
Result in man, be born and think
And act and love, a closer link
Betwixt us and the crowning race
[...]
Whereof the man that with me trod
This planet, was a noble type
Appearing ere the times were ripe

(Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*)

Needless to say, this fly with segmented appendages instead of wings, and a pair of legs assuming the structure of a mouth part, is only a monstrous Drosophila. But it is clearly what I have called a "hopeful monster." If such a monster were formed in nature and found a proper niche to which it were preadapted, the major step toward formation of a new class would have been accomplished.

(Richard B. Goldschmidt, "Ecotype, Ecospecies, and Macroevolution")

The most obvious way to recuperate Caliban's impertinence generates interpretations that are simply correct in that they register the poem's geneanological structure by mechanically imitating it in a frame of higher relevance. As E. Warwick Slinn has argued, "in Caliban's world [...] objects and events are misread signs, signs that gain meaning through being absorbed into his own version of a hermeneutic circle" (62) – to which we must add that it is just such an absorption Caliban himself suffers at the hands of the many hermeneutic monster-tamers who seek to classify him as a telling figure enabling a narrative of definitive meaning. In fact, the reason why Browning's Caliban has proven to be such a particularly irrestible challenge is arguably his seductive (but fallacious) availability for insertion into the hyperhermeneutic circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is indeed not surprising that both Howard and Timko should ultimately locate the truth of the poem in the presence-by-absence of divine Revelation, the supreme narrative of evidence for what is not evident. Both recognise the poem's concern with materiality, both see it as a response to the demands of scientific evidence, both criticise Caliban's geneanological processing of material evidence – both end up with the Word made flesh, a position they can only attain after a hermeneutic leap of divination that leaves behind the stubborn evidence (or lack of it) of the text.[16] Both move the poem towards resolution on the basis of a fulcrum that is just not there: the very idea, carried only by unwarranted analogy, that Caliban is a figure in our human narrative at all, a hopeless monstrosity prefiguring the hopeful monster that is the true Christian anticipating the Second Coming. The force of this hermeneutic interpretation is that, like Wordsworth's hermeneutic self-recollection in the Ode, it allows us to make sense of ourselves by geneanologically figuring forth a human homecoming as the true conclusion to Caliban's Odyssee: as Freud memorably said, "analogies, it is true, decide nothing, but they can make one feel more at home." (72)

Yet in its marked refusal to connect Caliban's isle to what we think of as our human continent, Browning's text stubbornly persists as a

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[16] For some further thoughts on hermeneutic divination and related matters, see my "Dead Herrings" (1994) and *Titanic Light* (1995: 70).

prefigurative critique of geneanological reason itself – a critique precisely of these reassuring, analogical, simply correct interpretations. To realise this resistance is itself a first step towards another way of coming to terms with it – rejecting it nonetheless, but this time in what hopes to approximate a critically true reading, not a simply correct interpretation. The point is not to simply reject hermeneutic interpretations like those I have been savaging here: they are important precisely in their enactment of the seriousness of the predicament "Caliban Upon Setebos" addresses, the "lack of a transcending principle" (Maclean 1987: 15). Yet these hermeneutic interpretations fail themselves to genuinely address this "profoundly tragic issue" (15) by assuming, in a decisive divination, that it has already been resolved into a chain of transcendental meaning. What a true reading of the poem proposes instead is a displacement of this resolution that recognises its origin in, indeed, a serious predicament intimately conditioned by its *literary* existence as a genuine question. To this genuine question of literature, hermeneutic interpretation is the inevitable but constitutionally premature answer, and the best we can hope to do is to insist that the link between literature and its meaning is still missing.

That this is not an easy task should be evident by now – even if only because what I have sketched in this essay so blatantly fails to be the true reading I celebrate here. A failure further compounded in this very celebration: for is not the assumption that "Caliban Upon Setebos" *is* a genuine literary question itself a thoroughly hermeneutic imposition? Who made it a poem in the first place? Browning did, by inscribing his words in the work of Shakespeare; I did, compensating for my decision not to insert the text in the hermeneutic body of Browning's corpus (as can and has been excellently done) by binding it instead to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode on the basis of a tenuous conceptual analogy. It is not enough to know this. Perhaps it doesn't even help.

> *I have expressed it all insufficiently, and will break the chain up, one day, and leave so many separate little round rings to roll each its way, if it can.*
>
> (Robert Browning, *Letter to Julia Wedgwood*, 31 Dec. 1864)

For is Browning even a poet? An unsigned review of *Dramatis Personae* in *The Athenaeum* for June 4th 1864 points up the relevance of this perversely trivial question:

> 'Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself,' says the quotation attached to Mr. Browning's 'Caliban,' but most assuredly no one ever thought Mr. Browning like unto any other poet! He could not if he would, and he would not if he could. He pioneers his own way, and follows no one's track for the sake of ease and smoothness. (Litzinger and Smalley 1970: 219)

How then can we recognise him as a poet – as, indeed, "one of our very few living poets [whose] book is a richer gift than we shall often receive at the hands of poetry in our time" (221)? All we have are traces. Yet the track takes care of itself.

Browning died in 1889 and was buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner. On this occasion, Henry James wrote a brilliant commemoration, speculating how Browning "would have enjoyed prefiguring and playing with the mystifications, the reservations, even perhaps the slight buzz of scandal, in the Poets' Corner, to which his own obsequies might give rise" among the "corporate company" of those already buried there (1966: 12-13):

> A good many oddities and a good many great writers have been entombed in the Abbey; but none of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones so odd. There are plenty of poets whose right to the title may be contested, but there is no poetic head of equal power – crowned and recrowned by almost importunate

> hands – from which so many people would withhold the distinctive wreath. All this will give the marble phantoms at the base of the great pillars and the definite personalities of the honorary slabs something to puzzle out until, by the quick operation of time, the mere fact of his lying there among the classified and protected, makes even Robert Browning lose a portion of the bristling surface of his actuality. (13)

Give me a firm tombstone on which to stand, and I will tell you what you were and were to be. So Shakespeare, so Wordsworth, so Browning. But the other portion will remain. So Hölderlin, perhaps.

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