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ROBERT BROWNING'S POETICS OF RESURRECTION IN 'TRANSCENDENTALISM: A POEM IN TWELVE BOOKS'

Keywords: Robert Browning; Resurrection; Transcendentalism; Men and Women; Jacob Boehme; Magic

Abstract: Resurrection is a recurring metaphor for poetry in Robert Browning's poems, plays and correspondence. Yet his attitude towards this trope is a conflicted one, as Browning often associates resurrection with an objectionable sacrilegious quest as well as with popular forms of Victorian magic, such as spiritualism and mesmerism, which he abhorred. In spite of this seeming rejection of magic, Browning's attitude towards magicians and magic language is also characterized by fascination and attraction, triggered by the occult books he read in his father's large and eccentric library. As a result, magicians and mystical theories often appear in his work, from his first published work, "Pauline" (1833), to his last publication, Asolando (1889). One example of the importance of magic to Browning's poetics of resurrection is the poem ''Transcendentalism' : A Poem in Twelve Books' (1855), in which Browning conjures up a dead magician so as to compare 'musty volumes' of ineffectual prose with resuscitative poetry inspired by Jacob Boehme's mystical notions of language. Indeed, Browning's dramatic monologues in Men and Women (1855) aim to emulate the resurrecting 'brace of rhymes' uttered by the mage in 'Transcendentalism' so as to galvanise his poetry and gain popular recognition after years of derision and indifference to his work.

On March 17th, 1883, six years before his death, Robert Browning writes to his friend, Mrs. Fitzgerald:

> [F]or poetry, if it is to deserve the name, ought to create – or re-animate something – not merely reproduce raw fact taken from somebody else's book (McAleer, 157)

Indeed, Browning's conception of poetry as creation or reanimation permeates his work, from the early "Pauline" (1833) and *Paracelsus* (1835) to his last publication, *Asolando* (1889). Throughout his career, Browning attempted to recreate/resuscitate historical personas and to imbue them with life, as two of the titles of his famous works reveal: *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864). Adam Roberts claims that Browning's favourite form of the Dramatic Monologue reflects his 'necromancing poetics' and his desire to unite with the infinite, especially after EBB's death in 1864 (112). Indeed, in his long poem which brought him long-sought popularity, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), Browning conjured up the characters from an 'Old Yellow Book' he had bought in 1859 or 1860, a legal document concerning the murder of Pompilia and her parents by her

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husband in 1698 (Hawlin 101). Browning's innovative form is an experiment in juggling multiple dramatic monologues that tell the story from nine different points of view, bringing the characters back to life by recreating their individual voices. In books I and XII of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning's speaker/poet deliberates on this artistic process of resuscitation, which he compares with God's creation:

> I find first
> Writ down for very A B C of fact,
> "In the beginning God made heaven and earth;"
> From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell
> And speak out a consequence — that man,
> Man — as befits the made, the inferior thing —
> Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
> Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow —
> Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
> The good beyond him — which attempt is growth —
> Repeats God's process in man's due degree,
> Attaining man's proportionate result —
> Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps. (I: 707-719)

The poet is 'forced' to emulate God, aiming to create with the use of language – yet since the act of creation is assigned merely to God and is considered sacrilegious as far as the poet is concerned, the poet embraces resuscitation as the sanctioned human endeavor, embodied in the poem itself. Later in Book XII of *The Ring and the Book*, Browning attempts to describe the power and aim of the poet, by differentiating between two types of poets who attempt this feat of 'resuscitation' – the magician and the prophet. The first type of poetic resuscitation is the magician's, associated with Faust's use of "old powers" (line 755) to "raise a ghost" (line 744):

> For such man's feat is, in the due degree,
> — Mimic creation, galvanism for life,
> But still a glory portioned in the scale.
> Why did the mage say — feeling as we are wont
> For truth, and stopping midway short of truth,
> And resting on a lie — "I raise a ghost?"
> …
> "I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
> "Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
> "(By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
> "What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
> "Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust's!" (XII: 739-759)

Browning's poet/speaker prefers to compare the writing of *The Ring and the Book* with Elisha's resuscitation of the child of the Shunammite woman (2 *Kings*, 4:8-37): an act of love sanctioned by God and mediated by the prophet rather than a magic feat associated with the devil and accomplished by a magician:

> Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was not Elisha once? —
> Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.

There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up
And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm:
And he returned, walked to and fro the house,
And went up, stretched him on the flesh again,
And the eyes opened. 'Tis a credible feat
With the right man and way. (XII: 760-772)

The rejection of Faustian resuscitation as a trope for poetic creation in *The Ring and the Book* is paired with Robert Browning's well known abhorrence of Victorian séances and spiritualism, and especially of the medium D. D. Home, a favourite with Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Karlin, *Hatreds* 49). Browning's initial scepticism changed into outrage after the Brownings took part in one of Home's séances in Ealing in 1855. In letters to friends he describes the séance, stating that he found "the whole performance most clumsy, and unworthy anybody really setting up for a 'medium'" (Karlin, *Hatreds* 52). Nine years after the séance and two years after his wife's death, "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", a dramatic monologue raging an attack on spiritualism, appeared in *Dramatis Personae*, and was received with much public interest and critical response. Browning's attack on spiritualism is twofold: it is an attack on the people who practise it, the exploitative mediums and the credulous clients, as well as on the logically weak theories behind spiritualism.

In spite of this rejection of the popular forms of Victorian magic, magicians and their magic language seem to hold an irresistible charm for Browning: growing up, he was acquainted with numerous occult books in his father's extraordinary library of approximately six thousand volumes (Hawlin 6). Indeed, most of Browning's magicians are not quacks but rather, like the poet, take the task of mediating between the infinite and the finite seriously, and are characterised with Browning's utmost sympathy. "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'" gives us an inkling of Browning's knowledge of Renaissance magic, Christian Hermeticism, alchemy, and kabbala. These subjects recur in Browning's poetry, before and after the writing of "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'", and not with an attitude of repugnance but rather with a qualified fascination. The first poem Browning published under his name was *Paracelsus*, based on the sixteenth century occultist's life. Browning's knowledge of Paracelsus's life derives mainly from an entry in the *Biographie Universelle* which describes him as "no better than an egregious quack", yet Browning depicts him in a most sympathetic way as a Faust-like hero; in contrast to Faust, however, Paracelsus is not damned but on his deathbed obtains the ultimate "secrets of the world" which he dedicated his whole life to discover (Woolford and Karlin, 314). Another sympathetic account of a magician is "Pietro of Abano" published in 1880, based on the thirteenth century magician to whom Browning referred in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett as "Poor dear wonderful persecuted Pietro d'Abano" (Browning, *Poems*, 2:1078).

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A remarkably positive representation of a magician and of occult thinking also appears in '"Transcendentalism": A Poem in Twelve Books', one of the poems of *Men and Women* (1855). In this poem, the idea of powerful poetic language which can actually create or reanimate dead objects, takes the form of the language of magic spoken by a magician. The speaker is an experienced poet who is neither named nor anchored in a specific time and place, and the poem provides no clues which would suggest to the reader an ironical gap between the speaker and the implied author, the poet Browning. The speaker, who identifies himself as a 'brother' poet, addresses a younger poet in a didactic and overbearing tone, and chastises the young poet for his poem, described as 'naked thoughts' (line 3) in 'dry words'(line 9), and regarded by the speaker as dead and boring:

> Stop playing, poet! May a brother speak?
> 'Tis you speak, that's your error. Song's our art:
> Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
> Instead of draping them in sights and sounds. (lines 1-4)

The 'absent' poem written by the young poet is an example of poor, ineffectual poetry, which mistakenly appeals to 'reason' rather than 'images and melody' (lines 17-8). In 1853, two years before the publication of *Men and Women*, Browning mentions a similar idea in a letter to his friend, Joseph Milsand:

> I am writing - a first step towards popularity for me - lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see...(Wood 112).

The collection *Men and Women* embodies this attempt at popularity: fifty dramatic monologues spoken by fifty different speakers, some imaginary, others recreated from historical sources, all depicted in 'sights and sounds' (line 4), as in the speaker's advice in 'Transcendentalism'. In order to persuade the young poet to write poetry draped in 'sights and sounds', the speaker relates the mystical revelation of the seventeenth century occult thinker Jacob Boehme, and how it was rendered into a tedious text :

> Objects throng our youth, 't is true;
>> We see and hear and do not wonder much:
>> If you could tell us what they mean, indeed!
>> As German Boehme never cared for plants
>> Until it happed, a-walking in the fields,
>> He noticed all at once that plants could speak,
>> Nay, turned with loosened tongue to talk with him.
>> That day the daisy had an eye indeed -
>> Colloquised with the cowslip on such themes!
>> We find them extant yet in Jacob's prose.
> But by the time youth slips a stage or two
> While reading prose in that tough book he wrote
> …
> We shut the clasps and find life's summer past. (19-33)

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Thus, Browning uses the example of Jacob Boehme in order to illustrate the gap between ineffective and powerful poetry .Unlike the first intertextual comment of the poem which is about an 'absent' inferior text, the second is an allusion to a real text written by Boehme and probably read by Browning in the Spring of 1853 (Woolford, Karlin, Phelan 3:641) when Elizabeth Barrett Browning and he were reading Swedenborg (DeVane 273). Boehme was a seventeenth century shoemaker and occult philosopher heavily influenced by Paracelsus and Agrippa, whose works had also been read by Browning. Although the fantasy of language which creates is contrasted in "'Transcendentalism'" with Jacob Boehme's "tough book", Browning does not disagree with Boehme's ideas on language but rather with his style, for Boehme believed he found the power of language in the form of the tie between word and thing. Boehme drew on Paracelsus's idea that every natural object manifests a sign which reveals the object's occult properties. He described a mystical experience in which natural objects suddenly reveal their supernatural essence and thus prove the existence of God within nature. This idea of the 'speech of nature' is equated by Boehme with the Kabbalistic idea of Adamic language according to which in the Garden of Eden Adam named the objects around him with names corresponding to their true essence, and that this sacred tongue was lost forever after the disaster of Babel (Eco 352).

Etymologically, the word 'daisy' derives from 'Day's eye', and Browning alludes to this in an attempt to illustrate Boehme's notion that the essence of an object is stamped onto its name. Indeed, Jacob Boehme believed that nature is the language of God, and that each living, temporal thing represents a power in the eternal world:

> So that when I see a herb standing, I may say with truth: This is an image of the Earth-spirit, in which the upper powers rejoice, and regard it as their child; for the earth spirit is but one being with the upper, outward powers (Boehme 198).

Unlike this mystical revelation, in which language and object come alive - Boehme's 'tough book' has no clear meaning but rather depends on our reading, 'the sense most to our mind' (32). The speaker's attitude towards this text is similarly aggressive: he terms it a "tough book" which the reader toils on only to "find life's summer past" (30-33).

Following these two examples of tedious texts, the speaker/poet presents his idea of powerful poetry which is draped 'in sights and sounds', poetry which creates and resuscitates, uttered by no other but a magician (line 4). Boehme is contrasted with the mage John of Halberstadt, an occult figure mentioned in Thomas Heywood's treatise on the occult (Woolford, Karlin, Phelan, 646):

> Then, who helps more, pray, to repair our loss-
> Another Boehme with a tougher book
> And subtler meanings of what roses say,-
> Or some stout Mage like him of Halberstadt,
> John, who made things Boehme wrote thoughts about?
> He with a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,
> And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,

Over us, under, round us every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all,-
Buries us in a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.   (34-45)

Browning differentiates between John, 'who made things' and Boehme, who 'wrote thoughts', hoping indeed to be like the first. The speaker employs an aggressive tone towards the two 'inferior' texts to which he refers, while 'Transcendentalism' itself attempts to be that powerful poetry which creates, rather than bores. Browning's poem attempts to emulate what the speaker defines as powerful and effective poetry, poetry which creates or resurrects. The final line, 'Pouring heaven into this shut house of life', is reminiscent of Browning's reference to all poetry as 'putting the infinite within the finite' in a letter to Ruskin after the publication of *Men and Women* in 1855.

Thus, in *Men and Women* Browning hoped to achieve such powerful and unequivocal poetry, which he believed would gain him critical acclaim and broad popularity (Ryals 110). The "musty volumes" represent Browning's anxiety over the production of 'weak' poetry, as well as a criticism of texts written by other authors. These lines portray the poet's fantasy, embodied in the magician's powerful rhymes, and his nightmare, that his works will be buried under a magician's spell among other "musty volumes". Accordingly, in this poem Browning asserts his desire to write poetry which creates: like the rose, Browning's men and women are the constructs of the objective poet's attempt to write poetry which will reanimate the objects it writes about.

Browning's Mystical Ideas on Language

As I have noted, Browning's criticism of Boehme's style does not imply a rejection of his theory of transcendent language, and this point is reemphasised in the "Parleying with Christopher Smart" of 1887. In this poem, Browning, in his own authorial voice, praises Smart for achieving what other poets could not achieve, namely, in Browning's words, "Pierc[ing] the screen/ 'Twixt thing and word" (113-4):

Was it that when, by rarest chance, there fell
Disguise from Nature, so that Truth remained
Naked, and whoso saw for once could tell
Us others of her majesty and might
In large, her loveliness infinite
In little, - straight you used the power wherewith
Sense, penetrating as though rind to pith
Each object, thoroughly revealed might view
And comprehend the old things thus made new,
So that while eye saw, soul to tongue could trust
Thing which struck word out, and once more adjust
Real vision to right language...
        ...each had its note and name

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> For Man to know by, - Man who, now - the same
> As erst in Eden, needs that all he sees
> Be named him ere he note by what degrees
> Of strength and beauty to its end Design
> Ever thus operates... (140-161)

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

Indeed, Browning was acquainted with the debate over the nature of the connection between signified and signifier, a traditional philosophical debate dating back to Greek philosophy, which in the nineteenth century becomes a linguistic focus of attention as well. The debate about the tie between signifier and signified was first introduced by Plato in 'Cratylus', and Browning was knowledgeable of this philosophical discussion, as well as with mystical notions of language from his father's eccentric library. Obviously, Browning did not use the terms signified and signifier, but rather termed the debate one of the relation between 'word and thing'. In 'Parleying with Christopher Smart' he applauds smart for obtaining powerful language which reveals the tie between objects and words:

> Smart, solely of such songmen, pierced the screen
> 'Twixt thing and word, lit language straight from soul,—
> Left no fine film-flake on the naked coal
>
> Live from the censer—shapely or uncouth,
> Fire-suffused through and through, one blaze of truth
> Undeadened by a lie — (lines 113-118)

Some light may be shed on Browning's knowledge of these occult theories of language by a claim made by Vivienne Browning, a descendant of the Browning family, that the Browning family had Rosicrucian affiliations. The Rosicrucian fraternity was an esoteric Christian cult which first declared its existence in the seventeenth century, and was accused of being a Satanic cult (Eco 180). Vivienne Browning claims us that Browning's favourite uncle, Reuben, was a Rosicrucian and had passed his knowledge of the cult to Browning himself (Karlin, *Hatreds*, 62). The cult, which was interested in hermetic writings, offered a theory of magic language derived from Boehme. They claimed to be able to read the "Book of Nature" to which Agrippa and Paracelsus referred, and to extract from it a "Magick writing...in the which withall is expressed and declared the Nature of all Things" (Eco 181). Moreover, it is Reuben who introduced Smart, who was also influenced by Hermetic writings, to the young Browning in 1824 (DeVane *Parleyings* 93). Smart's religious poems, including "The Song to David" to which Browning refers in his Parleyings, is greatly indebted to kabbalistic ideas which Smart may have been acquainted with from Rosicrucian or Hermetic writings (Walsh and Williamson 154). Thus, if

Vivienne Browning's claim is indeed valid, the origin of Browning's interest in and knowledge of occult theories of transcendent language may be explained.

Yet beyond the theories and their relation to Browning's idea of poetic language, there is also the sensual appeal of the rhythm and sound of magic spells which Browning admires in "The Flight of the Duchess" from *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*. The speaker in this poem is a servant describing his master's cruelty to his wife, the Duchess, and how she is bewitched by a gypsy, and escapes with her from the Duke. The speaker hears the gypsy bewitching the Duchess, and the "mystic" charm which she sings suddenly becomes comprehensible:

> As her head thrown back showed the white throat curving;
> And the very tresses shared in the pleasure,
> Moving to the mystic measure,
> Bounding as the bosom bounded.
> I stopped short, more and more confounded,
> And still her cheeks burned and eyes glistened,
> As she listened and she listened:
> When all at once a hand detained me,
> The selfsame contagion gained me,
> And I kept time to the wondrous chime,
> Making out words and prose and rhyme,
> Till it seemed that the music furled
>   Its wings like a task fulfilled, and dropped
>   From under the words it first had propped,
> And left them midway in the world:
> Word took word as hand takes hand,
> I could hear at last, and understand...   (548-564)

In these lines the speaker describes the gypsy's charm while he falls under its spell, and thus the poem itself becomes 'bewitched' and takes on some of the charm's characteristics: the rhythm, rhyme and alliteration attempt to mesmerise the reader just like the gypsy is mesmerising the Duchess. Similarly, the experienced poet who criticises tedious writing in "'Transcendentalism'" attempts to emulate the magician's rhymes which he presents as perfect poetry, and thus the poem itself again attempts to take on the properties of the magical language to which it refers. Yet in both cases the failure to achieve such magic language in poetry is embedded in the poem: in both poems there is a sense of the inherent inferiority of the written word to the powerful oral spell and an attempt to create an illusion of an oral effect in lines of verse. Moreover, the poems are ultimately inferior to the language of magic which creates roses and bewitches Duchesses: magic language symbolises an unreachable and perfect poetic language which only a select few, Browning believes, have mastered.

Thus, in spite of Browning's rejection of spiritualism and of superstitious magic thought for rational and religious reasons, he shows a fascination with magicians and sympathy for them. The language of magic has an especially strong appeal to him in terms of its poetic inspiration, its ability to resurrect, and its endeavour to mediate between the divine and the human. His ambivalence towards magic does not influence his embrace of occult theories of language which have

infiltrated Christian thought and derive from sources such as kabbala, Paracelsus, Agrippa, and Boehme, though he is well aware of their origin. As a whole, though magic in Browning's works is frequently presented as ludicrous and superstitious, it is quite clear that in many ways it still has Browning under its spell.

Conclusion

Browning's notion of poetry as resuscitation is closely associated with powerful, supernatural language, based on a mystical conception of language which creates rather than merely denotes, and in which signified and signifier are tied up in an unshakeable bond. Philip Drew convincingly argues that the young poet and the speaker coincide with the subjective and objective poets in Browning's 'Essay on Shelley' written three years earlier, in 1852 (Drew 45). In this introduction to the fake letters of Shelley (1852), Browning distinguishes between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' poets. The objective poet, like Shakespeare, is one 'whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external', and the subjective poet, like Shelley, is 'appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind' (Browning, "Essay" 574, 576). Browning, who admired both, wished to fulfill both aims: create/resuscitate as well as touching the infinite. Both these aims are revealed in his relatively obscure sonnet on Shakespeare, 'The Names', written for the Shakespearean Showbook in 1884 (Karlin, *Victorian Shakespeare* 152). Browning once again divulges a fantasy in which poetic language actually creates, rather than merely describes:

> Shakespeare! — to such name's sounding, what succeeds
> Fitly as silence? Falter forth the spell, —
> Act follows word, the speaker knows full well,
> Nor tampers with its magic more than needs.
> Two names there are: That which the Hebrew reads
> With his soul only; if from lips it fell,
> Echo, back thundered by earth, heaven and hell,
> Would own 'Thou did'st create us!' Nought impedes
> We voice the other name, man's most of might,
> Awesomely, lovingly: let awe and love
> Mutely await their working, leave to sight
> All of the issue as — below — above —
> Shakespeare's creation rises: one remove,
> Though dread — this finite from that infinite.

Browning alludes here to the Jewish traditional belief that the letters of the name of God, the Tetragrammaton, should not be uttered because they contain inherent powers; in other words, the letters that make up the ineffable name of God are not merely arbitrary signifiers but contain some of the power of the signified, God. This mystical notion, derived from the Kabbala, was adopted by Christian mystical texts Browning must have read and known, since the idea appears six times in Browning poems (Manor 6). This mystical idea of powerful language, similar to Boehme's and Smart's ideas on language, exposes Browning's attraction to

supernatural notions of language that can overcome the gap between 'thing' and 'word', and create perfect poetry, one which resurrects the objects it describes. Yet this sonnet shows an awareness that this attempt is doomed to fail. First, these lines speak of the superior power of the spoken word to the written one: God's name is uttered rather than merely written, if it wishes to exert power, and Browning must have known that in most occult theories magic spells need to be uttered to awaken their latent power – written, they are powerless. Therefore, Browning's preference for the form of the dramatic monologue could be an attempt to create an illusion of powerful spoken language, which creates rather than merely denotes.

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