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OSI file created: 8 Jun 1995

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Wanted Dead or Alive: Browning's Historicism [\[1\]](#)

Man's ambition is two-fold; he will not only live in the minds of posterity; he will also have lived in ages long gone by; he looks not only forwards but backwards also; and no people on earth is indifferent to the fancied honour of being able to trace its origin to the gods, and of being ruled by an ancient race. [\[2\]](#)

The main business of Criticism, after all, is not to legislate, not to classify, but to raise the dead. [\[3\]](#)

I begin with a distinction between two historicisms that are germane to Browning's work in the dramatic monologue and, I think, to the function of criticism at the present time. The first historicism is documentary, analytic, and abstractive. Scanning the past for stirrings of the

zeitgeist, it reads the individual self (whether character or author) as symptomatic evidence of the transpersonal reality of gradual, ineluctable cultural change. This overarching History doubly **comprehends** individuality in one master stroke, including it and thereby explaining it too. Such historicism marks the way of the scholar, the student of culture as such, and the professional intellectual in training--or, in other words, most of the doctoral candidates I see these days. The second historicism typifies instead the untutored reader--or, in other words, most of the undergraduates I see these days--for whom the inward organization of a discrete self (again, whether character or author) forms the hermeneutic project's practical focus and goal. This second historicism turns the first one inside out, or rather outside in. It interprets the details of history as so many contextual appurtenances to the truth of subjective experience: accidents to its essence; constituent ingredients, at most, of a psychological whole that transcends the sum of its parts. If my first historicism wants to know what history **means**, my second historicism wants to know how history **feels**. Each of these approaches to the past gets differently rewarded by Robert Browning's poems on historical subjects; indeed, each has been around since Browning's day. [4]

For each, moreover, there happens to be recorded an exemplary response by a celebrated contemporary reader of the poem on which I shall concentrate here, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," first collected in Browning's **Dramatic Romances and Lyrics** of 1845. One of these responses being noisily public, the other barely a whisper, let me present them in the order not of their chronology but of their clamor, starting with the one everybody notices. John Ruskin's handsome tribute to "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" occurs in volume 4 of **Modern Painters**, published in 1856 on the strength of a decade's acquaintance with the poem:

I know of no other piece of modern English, prose or poetry, in which there is so much told, as in these lines, of the Renaissance spirit,--its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin. It is nearly all that I have said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the Stones of Venice, put into as many lines, Browning's also being the antecedent work. [5]

[Connect to 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb' \[VIVA users only\]](#)

Part compliment, part citation, right down to the punctilio with which earlier publication is acknowledged, Ruskin's notice bespeaks a regard that is distinctly intellectual. It also expresses a collateral regard for poetry as a medium that can perform, with enviable efficiency, much the same work of knowing that is executed by Ruskin's own prose. In matters of connoisseurship, by definition, it takes one to know one. Discerning Browning's discernment, Ruskin hails in the poet a fellow savant, whose superiority is exhibited through the detection of cognitive deficit in others. Witness the repeatedly hammered "inconsistency," "hypocrisy," "ignorance of itself"--cognate vices all of the Renaissance spirit, once it is summoned to the bar of a Victorian judgment that knows the Renaissance better in historical hindsight than that perturbed spirit could ever know itself.

We shall return to Ruskin's position and what it exemplifies. Indeed, as heirs however restive to Victorian intellectual life we shall find it very hard to do anything but return to Ruskin's position and what it exemplifies. First, however, let us sample the quite different response that Elizabeth Barrett Barrett recorded to "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" a decade previously. Penned in a private letter to the author--a love letter, really, in all but name--and based on a sneak preview of poems that Robert was gathering several months before publication of his new book, EBB's response breathes the reticence of her still tentative intimacy with the Bishop's strange creator:

& first to the St Praxed's, which is of course the finest and most powerful . . & indeed full of the power of life . . and of death. It has impressed me very much. [6]

Barrett evidently took from the poem an impression quite different from the one it would leave on the impressionist herald Ruskin. Where Barrett is impressed, Ruskin is instructed; he finds knowledge where she finds power. What kind of power she does not specify, unlike Ruskin with his itemized list. Since his fanfare can make her confidential understatement look merely, demurely vague, I should disclose right away my belief that her carefully chosen words of praise are keyed acutely to a major crux for historicist understanding of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb." On that understanding, more soon; for now, though, simply note how differently our two Victorian respondents greeted Browning's poem. Their reactions are so different, in fact, that one wonders whether by some historicist law of energy conservation the critical knowledgeability of the one and the creative impressionability of the other may not be mutually exclusive; whether, when it comes to reading historical texts, the knowledge Ruskin finds and the power Barrett finds are available only at each other's expense. Although I frame this question in terms derived from the era of Wordsworth, De Quincey, and Arnold, it seems to me a genuinely open question of some moment for our moment too, and for the way we seem to have taken lately to doing literary history. [7]

For Ruskin's way of scholarly cognition, not Barrett's way of susceptible appreciation, is the kind of reading most likely to gain a hearing in today's historicist climate. So runs the large disciplinary lesson we regularly impart to our most eager students, by classroom example and in the form of practical worldly advice, as we superintend their metamorphosis from self-fulfilling undergraduates into self-positioning PhDs. There are many good reasons why this should be so--so many, and in such vigorous circulation, that it ought to suffice if I sketch in light outline for Browning's "Bishop" the sort of interpretation that a more ponderous Ruskinian documentary and analytic methodology would underwrite. Indulge a baker's dozen lines from the wonderful opening of the poem:

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
 Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
 Nephews--sons mine. . . ah God, I know not! Well--
 She, men would have to be your mother once,
 Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
 What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
 Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
 And as she dies so must we die ourselves,
 And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.
 Life, how and what is it? As here I lie
 In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
 Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
 "Do I live, am I dead?" [8]

The dying Bishop's ill-censored discourse is a veritable switchboard of codes, a sixteenth-century information highway cluttered with junk mail that is at once representative of its time and incongruous with itself. Even from these few lines we may see how Browning crisscrosses his text referentially, allusively--also prosodically, as Mary Ellis Gibson has pointed out--by a definitive set of what Ruskin called "inconsistencies" and we would call contradictions. [9] What these definitive contradictions define is, at a primary level, a venality of character that seems by turns deplorable and ludicrous (adjectives that delimit fairly, I think, the axis of response which Ruskin

acknowledges: the Bishop is a villain; the Bishop is a riot).^[10] Furthermore, beyond moral psychology, the ethical contradictions exemplified in the Bishop define the historical juncture that he embodies. "Rome, 15--" (the poem's subtitle) identify an epoch poised between ecclesiastical and secular dispensations; between cultural allegiances to scripture and to the pagan classics; between value systems grounded in the next world and in this; between, in two words, the soul and the body. To highlight the line with which I broke off and to which I shall be returning: the twofold question "Do I live, am I dead?" pivots between rival Renaissance perspectives as to the meaning of "life." "Life, how and what is it?" Does it inhere in physical vitality, or in that apocalyptic life everlasting toward which the Bishop gropes his groggy way when he recurs to the phrase exactly one hundred lines later, imagining the tomb "Whereon I am to lie till I must ask,"--at Doomsday this time--"Do I live, am I dead?" (ll. 111-13).

Ruskin's statement implies all this, or nearly all; thus far we are still within the orbit of his learning as well as his approach. But of course in a century and a half the method Ruskin espoused has outmoded the knowledge he possessed--if only in T. S. Eliot's sense that he and his era have become the disciplinary tradition that makes our knowledge modern. No new historicist reading of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" would be complete did it not do for the Victorians what the Victorians taught us to do for the Renaissance when they invented it 150 years ago.^[11] So let us proceed to ask a question that Ruskin could not, and let us rub it in a little by making the question a rhetorical one: Could anything be more definitive of the epoch of Browning and Ruskin than the very life-and-death contradictions we have just been enumerating? Update the clerical vestments with a Carlylean presto, and what transpires across this fancy-dress poem but the Victorian Church's broadening decline into secularity, the transvaluation of the biblical with the literary in nineteenth-century culture, the supplanting of theology by biology and of the pastor by the physician? We can now see, as Ruskin could not, how in staging the contest of body and soul Browning was playing out in episcopal-historical charade the contest of matter with spirit that most exercised the Victorian frame of mind. "Do I live, am I dead?" Does Arthur Hallam? Do Cathy and Heathcliff? Does Sydney Carton? What about Count Dracula? Such were the vital, nonrhetorical questions that were played out in imaginative literature, for mortal stakes, between the spiritualist and materialist theories that riddled Victorian culture.

If Ruskin did not know these things about the poem he paused from *Modern Painters* to admire, that is because he was living the riddle himself. So too with Browning, who urged his poem on its first publisher in 1845 as "just the thing for the time--what with the Oxford business."^[12] The biggest "Oxford business" boom, John Henry Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism, would not rock the nation until later that year, after Browning's poem was in print. Yet inasmuch as the poet sought to attach his new work to the furore aroused by the Oxford Movement, Tractarianism, and High-Church ritualist resolutions of the spirit/matter divide, he committed himself to a topical pertinence that can look in hindsight merely superficial--as petty as the anti-Catholic prejudice that would continue to condition Ruskin's praise a decade later. It is important, no doubt, to register such blindness, particularly when we spot it in possessors of first-rate insight like Browning and Ruskin. But as important tasks go, ideological demystification is or has become a pretty easy task, thanks to the virtually mechanical cognitive advantage that historical distance affords. (Just about as easy, and as mechanical, as routine "ironic" readings of dramatic monologues got to be in Victorian studies a generation ago, and for just about the same reason: the culture-driven New Historicism of the eighties is, all told, the most readily teachable critical method since the text-driven New Criticism of the fifties.) Parochial lapses into inconsistency are just the sort of thing that the analytic, still vestigially Whiggish historicism we inherit from the nineteenth century prompts us to look for first when taking the measure of the past. So even as we indict the Victorian spirit for "ignorance of itself"--Ruskin's very phrase of indictment for the spirit of the Renaissance--and as we convert the ignorance of benighted Victorian minds into a

new object for progressive modern knowledge, we are still affirming, whether we know it or not, an eminently Victorian way of intellectual life.[\[13\]](#)

There is nothing to stop us from calling such inherited historicism "new" if we want to, but we ought then to recall that its logic dooms us to becoming old news in our turn before very long. "And as she died so must we die ourselves, / And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream"--a dream or theory of obsolescent modernity, entailing supersession by the modern dreams or theories that will flaunt their brief modernity tomorrow. Taking a documentary approach to texts from a past--we--are--determined--to--know--better--than leaves us scot-free: high and dry, but also coldly comforted. The real problem with this kind of analytically abstractive historicism is not that it consigns our interpretations to rapid superannuation. The provisionality of our views is something we at all events learn to live with, or had better learn. The real problem is rather that the abstraction upon which such analysis depends in effect depresses the awareness of our own being in time, our own felt historicity. And with this denial of our own felt historicity, we lose our only access, imperfect and slippery though it be, to the contradictions that are definitively ours--a loss that can only hasten our obsolescence, as I trust the brief case of Ruskin on Browning's Bishop has made clear.

The realm of the felt contradiction: here we approach what Elizabeth Barrett was pointing toward in her comment about how impressively full Browning's poem was "of the power of life . . . and of death." It often happens in the correspondence of these two learned poets that personal compliment travels under allusive cover; here Elizabeth seems to be answering Robert's opening citation of the Biblical Preacher with a citation of her own from Proverbs 18:21: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."[\[14\]](#) That the power of the tongue--poetic power--was for Browning the power to restore the historical dead to imaginative life is a principle expounded most fully in his epic manifesto at the start of *The Ring and the Book* (1868).[\[15\]](#) But the principle was implicit in the three decades of historical monologues that preceded it. The success of the medieval "Count Gismond" (1842), the Renaissance "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855) and the eighteenth-century "Abt Vogler" (1864) owes much to their capacity for imparting to the reader the feeling not just *of* history but *for* history. These and other monologues reconstitute a past circumstantial ambience, after the fashion of much Victorian historical fiction. But that is not all they do. They also do what is necessary if those dry bones are to live for modern minds: they enact the reciprocation of historicist desire, whereby the reader's backward yearning to know the past feelingly meets the historical agent's projective will to survive into the future. The result is an effect which Elizabeth Barrett was quick to describe in another 1845 comment to the poet, and which is still available to us if our Ruskinian censor will but lie still: "You force your reader to sympathize positively in his glory in being buried!"[\[16\]](#)

"The Bishop Orders His Tomb" shows how early Browning had learned this trick of compelling a positive sympathy. It is the trick of the poetic resurrection--man: incorporating into the speech of the living dead a pattern of references to the process of resuscitation itself, a pattern that evokes and proleptically figures the cooperation of poet and reader in representing the vanished past. A remarkable instance of this process furnishes the donnee of the whole poem, namely the Bishop's immortalist revery of transubstantiation into stone. This hyperbolic figuration of the commemorative impulse is also, as Cornelia Pearsall has shown in the best recent article on the poem, remarkably subtle in the range of its significations.[\[17\]](#) "Marble's language" (l. 98) extends well beyond Latin inscription, and even beyond the stupendously jumbled iconography of sculpturesque form within the Bishop's blue-movie scenario:

Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance

Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
 The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
 Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan
 Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
 And Moses with the tables. . . .
 (ll. 57–62)

Syncretism on this scale mounts to a sustained Pygmalion fantasy fusing art with nature, masculine with feminine, self with effigy, life's mystery with its imponderable sequel. The resulting riot of veined, pulsing, and eloquent stone, "brown Greek manuscripts" and "great smooth marbly limbs" (ll. 74–75), is also a triumph of, to coin a phrase Browning would have endorsed, Renaissance self-fashioning.

There can be no vocal self-fashioning, in the dialogized world of the Browning monologue, without the fashioning of the other who hears.^[18] The more fully historical the monologue, the stronger the tendency of the specifically imagined listener to reserve an auditorium seat for the eavesdropping historicist reader.^[19] Overtly appealing to a specified audience, the speaker is smuggling time-capsule messages to us all the while, even—or particularly—when the overt speech-act fails, as it patently does for the Bishop. Addressing a collection of nephews/sons whose paternity may be questionable but whose grasping self-interest, never in question, makes them feel just like family, the Bishop places an order that is sure to go unfilled. But through these auditors the poem makes its appeal to a different posterity: the one comprising its readers, whose curiosity or fascination with the past mirrors the Bishop's bemusement or obsession with the future. Our desire for the past that was the Bishop's matches, and so to speak fulfills, his desire for the future that will be ours. For if we think of "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" as a special case of the ekphrastic text—special because within the implied fiction of this poem the art object at its center has no more than a verbal existence, is nothing but the Bishop's hallucinated ekphrasis of it—then in the ekphrastic contest between visual and verbal media the victory of poetry is especially choice. Hearsed in words alone, the Bishop may be the more readily planted in the mind; and lines 111–13 all but say so: "To comfort me on my entablature" (this tablet, this marbled block of graven paper on which we meet him) "Whereon I am to lie till I must ask" (the very question Browning's historical monologues always solicitously put to the reader they find) "Do I live, am I dead?" Barrett Browning's proverbial allusion had it right, dead right: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

Of this power, as we have seen, Ruskin's commentary knows nothing. I suspect this is so because his brand of historicism deems such power inimical to the knowledge on which he takes his authoritative stand. And yet this power discloses a feature which, although it escapes Ruskin's long list of Renaissance characteristics, may be the most distinctively Renaissance thing about Browning's poem. Ruskin's analytic abstraction from the historicist feeling for the past keeps him fixated on the love of good Latin, but numb to the philological revival of learning which the love of good Latin both betokened and enabled, back at the birth of the modern historical sense. "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" proposes, with great imaginative penetration, that the humanist revival of learning bespoke an epochal shift in ultimate perspectives on matters of life and death, a shift in which the nascent, eager historicism of the Renaissance itself played a major role. The Renaissance thrill at excavating the past was of a piece with the Renaissance will to dig into mundane time and stay there, living forever through the ministry of the humanities and in the name of art. Where philology put death and life in the power of the tongue, a grammarian's funeral might become, as Browning's 1855 poem of that title would make plain, a carnival affair at which it was a toss-up whether to laugh or cry.

The complex of risk and will that attended the secular investments of early modern humanism accounts for the Bishop's recurrence to scenes of exhumation, where the past uncannily emerges into light and life. His infectious joy at "new-found agate urns as fresh as day" (97) takes part imaginatively in the unearthed antiquities' seeming conquest of time. Fresh as whose day? Caesar's? Borgia's? Victoria's? (Has anybody got the time?) Concurrently, and subliminally, the line describes a like effect of historical disinterment in the seance that is Browning's poem, as what once died "by degrees" leaps the scale of years and takes life again. Another turn of the table, or screw, yields the macabre glamour of a passage in which the Bishop, for all the world like Browning himself, knowingly *stages* such an unearthing:

Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sink,
And if ye find. . . Ah God, I know not, I! . . .
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
Some lump, ah God, of *lapis lazuli* ,
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast. . . .
(ll. 36-44)

If the luxurious foreplay and violent scopic prurience of these lines recall pornography, that may be because primal reactions are to be expected from primal scenes. For what this passage images is a, if not the, primal scene of Renaissance humanism: the rebirth of antiquity--classically alien, uncannily intact--from the vernacular womb of earthy time. "Ah God, I know not": evoking the same apotropaic disclaimer which earlier attended the Bishop's conjuration of the mysteries of sex and birth (l. 3), the mounting excitement of this passage is due less to any aesthetic property in the recovered object, and far less to any abstractive cognition of the object à la Ruskin, than to the carnal-knowledge scenario of historical recovery itself. And the fact that the Bishop has *planted* his archaeological find matters hardly at all--about as much as it matters that no convincing sixteenth-century original has been identified for Browning's invented Bishop at St. Praxed's Church in Rome or any place else. What does matter is the communicable thrill of historical contact, the rapture that annuls the death that poisons time.[\[20\]](#)

Hide and seek. Fort und da. Freud's Little Hans has nothing on Browning's Bishop when it comes to the joy of full retrieval, or to the horror of its opposite, inconsolable loss. Here that loss takes the form of entropic decomposition: "Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat / As if the corpse they keep were oozing through" (ll. 116-17). Pearsall valuably reminds us that the revulsion in these lines arises from contemplating the decay, not of the body, but of its effigy (p. 54). The disfigurement of the signifier, its erosion into irrecoverable blur, is the special nightmare of humanist historicism; and its pathos should serve to melt all but the hardest of scholarly hearts--particularly in a poem that has been threatening to degenerate into nonsense ever since the wild discordance of its opening lines. Indeed, as the Bishop recoils from his secular hell into the firm significance of strong representation, the poem's final recovery is so welcome, so historically relieving, that Browning can make it the occasion for a little coup. To me, as to most readers I have consulted, it seems by the end of the poem that the Bishop is actually in the church he has so lovingly imagined. We know quite well, of course, that he has not left the "state-chamber" of line 11, dying there as he must by degrees. Yet when all is said, by the end of the poem there he is in the sanctuary, where on his own terms he is *saved*: caught up into the verbal equivalent of that symbolic order which the poem has been pretending, but only pretending, to

vest in stone and gems.

"Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?" asks line 52. Well, so where is he? Browning's first, purely ekphrastic choice of title for this poem was "The Tomb at St. Praxed's"; but the expanded title we know it by is both more technically accurate and more disingenuous. Observe how in the revised title the "at" phrase slips away from the tomb and volunteers to modify, situate, and thus fulfill, the speech act it introduces--the whole purpose of which is, after all, to gather its speaker into the artifice of eternity. A corner in St. Praxed's proves Byzantium. We end the poem neither here nor there, then, but instead in an unexpected niche of that nowhere in which all textuality and reading participate to some extent, and in which both the means and the ends of historical writing have a deeper utopian stake than its apologists have ever liked to concede in principle.[\[21\]](#)

"Full of the power of life . . . and of death," the Bishop's gargantuan historicist appetite for time travel constitutes his claim on us, because for all our modern historical sophistication we share and requite it. It is because we do reciprocate its transport that the imagination of a powerfully historicist poet like Browning can spirit deathbeds into churches, build and unbuild cenotaphs and sunny domes in air. So very impressive a power of life and death deserves more of our attention, especially at a time when we have tended to neglect it for the sake of what we can, with Ruskin and in the name of a renewed historicism, subdue to the factual, corporeal understanding. If that renewed historicism could itself use some renewal about now, if its procedures are dwindling into applied routine and its findings into diminishing returns, our profoundest disciplinary needs are unlikely to be met by further refinements in the theory of culture and the practice of contextual correlation. It may be time for our literary history to call on art and imagination once more. They have moved again, of course--they always do--but the address should turn up if we keep looking. Given the uncanny power of Browning's historicism in this monologue, we may be surprised to see who answers.

Notes

[1] This essay is, in revised form, a paper read at the 1993 conference of the Modern Language Association in Toronto. My thanks to Claire Berardini for arranging the special session "Situating the Self: New Theoretical Approaches to the Victorian Dramatic Monologue."

[2] Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology* (London: Lumley, 1851) 1:2.

[3] Walter Raleigh, quoted in Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 78.

[4] The Victorian coexistence, and rivalry, of these theories of history has a history of its own, running from Carlyle's Romantic dictum about history's being the essence of innumerable biographies to the overweening positivism of H. T. Buckle at the middle of the century and the

methodical social scientism of J. B. Bury near its close.

[5] ***Modern Painters*** 4:380, quoted in W. C. DeVane, ***A Browning Handbook*** , 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1955), pp. 167–68.

[6] Letter of 21 July 1845, no. 64 in ***The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845–1846*** , ed. Elvan Kintner (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 1:130. EBB's letter of 22 October puts "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" first in a list of RB's forthcoming poems (1:244), and that of 12 November expressly singles it out for "first place" (1:267). The poem had been published as "The Tomb at St. Praxed's" in ***Hood's Magazine*** , March 1845.

[7] I have in mind Wordsworth's Preface to ***Lyrical Ballads*** (1800) and, at the distance of half a century, ***The Prelude*** (1850) V.421–25; Act II of Arnold's ***Empedocles on Etna*** (1852) and Arnold's suave lobbying on behalf of the critical intellect and its knowledge in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864); the distinction drawn by De Quincey between "literature of knowledge" and "literature of power" in "Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected" (1823; ***Collected Writings*** , rev. ed. David Masson [Edinburgh: Black, 1890], 10:46–49), and again in "The Poetry of Pope" (1848; ***Collected Writings*** 11:54–60). But in truth the knowledge/power distinction so pervades not only the nineteenth century, but also twentieth-century reflection on the nineteenth century, that my topic here would be inconceivable without it.

[8] Robert Browning, ***The Poems*** , ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981), p. 413.

[9] Mary Ellis Gibson, ***History and the Prism of Art: Browning's Poetic Experiments*** (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1987), pp. 249–50.

[10] A similar polarity is identified in ***A Tale of Two Cities*** (1859) by Albert D. Hutter, "The Novelist as Resurrectionist: Dickens and the Dilemma of Death," ***Dickens Studies Annual*** 12 (1983): 1–39. Dickens' ironic awareness of his own sure transformation into a living corpus emerges in the way Jerry Cruncher's funny vocation as a grave-robber or "Resurrection Man" shadows the grandeur of Sydney Carton's secular ***imitatio Christi*** : "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (pp. 18, 27–28). See also Margaret Gent, "'To Flinch from Modern Varnish': The Appeal of the Past to the Victorian Imagination," in ***Victorian Poetry*** , ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Arnold, 1972), pp. 11–35.

[11] So fully did the Victorians invent the Renaissance in their own image that it was possible for an early metahistorian like G. P. Gooch to invert the relationship, without a trace of irony, at the peroration to his preface to ***History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*** (2nd ed. London: Longmans, 1913): "For the liberty of thought and expression, the insight into different ages and the judicial temper on which historical science depends, the world had to wait till the nineteenth century, the age of the Second Renaissance" (p. 13).

[12] Letter of 18 February 1845 to F. O. Ward, quoted in vol. 4 of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Ian Jack et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 66. The "Oxford business" during the 1840s entailed, beyond Anglo-Catholic dogmatics, antiquarian and archaeological activity that was then at its peak in Britain and was, through the offices of the Camden Society and others like it, abuzz with ecclesiastical animus. See Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 67.

[13] Victorian progressivism and Protestant chauvinism converged time and again upon Victorian study of the Reformation era-- Browning's preferred haunt, and also the area that his historian peers most favored for their own inquisitions. These were typically seasoned if not wholly motivated by a partisan, controversialist zeal to stalk the nineteenth century through the sixteenth: see Levine, p. 77.

[14] The relevance of this scripture verse to a courtship context seems strengthened by Robert's later monologue "A Lovers' Quarrel" (1855): "O power of life and death / In the tongue, as the Preacher saith!" (ll. 90-91). See also the philological fancy with which Elizabeth introduces her 1842 *Athenaeum* essay on the Greek Christian poets: "Wonderful it is to look back fathoms down the great Past. . . to feel **words** rise up like a smoke--words of men, even words of women, uttered at first, perhaps, in 'excellent low voices,' but audible and distinct to our times, through 'the dreadful pothor' of life and death." The very language of this much-belated Greek verse, she goes on, wears "the aspect of an Alcestis returned from the dead, **veiled**, but identical" (*Essays on the Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets* [New York: Miller, 1863], pp. 11-12, 14). Robert, who arranged for the publication of this posthumous book of Elizabeth's uncollected essays, was to incorporate a translation of Euripides' *Alkestis* into *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871), the happiest of his widower tributes.

[15] See especially l.707-72. The human poet "Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps" (719); "Yet something dead may get to live again" (729). See also as pertinent to "The Bishop" the meditations on personal, ecclesiastical, and cultural history that structure the Pope's great monologue in Book X. I cite *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 42.

[16] Quoted in *Poetical Works*, ed. Jack, p. 75. For a highly suggestive look at the strategic force which Browning's rhetoric acquires from topics of life and death--better yet, from the liminal life-and-death topos itself--see Steven C. Dillon, "Browning and the Figure of Life," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32 (1990): 169-86. The assertion there that "Browning erases the gap between this life and a life beyond precisely by writing into the space of death" resonates richly with our interest here in the poet's uncanny historicism. Dillon extends this argument in a more recent article canvassing tropes of stratigraphic layering drawn from a range of Victorian writers: "The Archaeology of Victorian Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54 (1993): 237-61.

[17] "Browning and the Poetics of the Sepulchral Body," *Victorian Poetry* 30 (1992): 43-59. The late-medieval fashion for mortuary effigies, which reached its zenith among the magnates of sixteenth-century Rome (Browning's scene exactly), is discussed by Philippe Aries, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977), pp. 170-71. Rendering the body as if at the very

hour of death, these sculptures fostered an "illusion of incorruptibility" (171), "a slumber which leaves the eyes open, which resembles life without quite being life, or afterlife either" (239; my translation): or, as the Bishop has it, "Peace, peace seems all" (l. 13). This Renaissance "hesitation" between two worlds Aries associates with the neutral state of *requies* (262); for Victorian analogies see Michael Wheeler, "'Can These Dry Bones Live?': Questions of Belief in a Future Life," in *The Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe*, ed. David Jasper and T. R. Wright (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 23–36, and, on "The Bishop," *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 34–45. What these accounts omit, and Browning's poem insists on, is the historicist counterforce of *desire*. The moment of death captured in Renaissance tomb effigies is the moment at which, as the grandee's body becomes a counterfeit of life, the grandee becomes pure history, his fame forecast and prefigured in sempiternal sculpture and inscription ("ELUCESCEBAT" [l. 99] emerges in this context as a verb tense that is lethally imperfect). It is the overdetermined rhetoricity of this gamble on fame that Browning's poem lays bare, as the reckless posturing of the Bishop shows that rhetoric is all he has. The Bishop's lust for the immobile piety of *requies*, like its inverse his horror of dissolution, marks the aversion from death that Aries finds typical of the modern era. This very lust, I maintain, is the secret that Browning has his Bishop catch us with.

[18] On questions of audience in Browning see especially Dorothy Mermin, *The Audience in the Poem* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and His Audiences* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984); and most recently Glenn Everett, "'You'll Not Let Me Speak': Engagement and Detachment in Browning's Monologues," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19 (1991): 123–42. For an approach to Browning's rhetorical strata conducted along Bakhtinian lines, see Ashton Nichols, "Dialogism in the Dramatic Monologue: Suppressed Voices in Browning," *Victorians Institute Journal* 18 (1990): 29–51.

[19] The ushering and situation of the reader among a ghostly historical auditory become explicit preliminary business in the proem to *Sordello* (1840) l.49–52:

My audience! and they sit, each ghostly man
Striving to look as living as he can,
Brother by breathing brother; thou art set,
Clear-witted critic, by. . .

On audience, reader, and history in this still dishonored poem see Christine Froula, "Browning's *Sordello* and the Parables of Modernist Poetics," *ELH* 52 (1986) 965–92.

[20] For this archaeological topos in its descent from Scott and Wordsworth through Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), the Victorian locus classicus remains Pater's 1867 essay "Winckelmann," which became the final chapter in *The Renaissance* (1873). For Winckelmann "the antique world. . . early came to seem more real than the present." "Divining beyond the words some unexpressed pulsation of sensuous life," with the poor scholar's eventual access to art collections:

Suddenly he is in contact with that life, still fervent in the relics of plastic art. Filled as our culture is with the classical spirit, we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved, when, at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for us the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance. (The Renaissance:

Studies in Art and Poetry, ed. Adam Phillips [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], pp. 115, 118.)

As the eruption of present tenses into Pater's elegant narrative suggests, the naive renaissance of Winckelmann's historical sense prefigures its sophisticated revival in Pater, for whom its power is fulfilled as knowledge without loss. See the excellent discussion by Carolyn Williams, ***Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*** (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), especially pp. 145, 161–67.

[21]Consider the premier public historian of Victorian England, T. B. Macaulay. His eminence owed much to the bullish evangelism with which he proclaimed the rightness of modern fact as such. Yet it was also partially due to his great gifts as a *laissez-faire* narrative entrepreneur, for whom facts were "the mere dross of history" ("On History" [1828], in ***Essays Critical and Miscellaneous*** [Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847], p. 55). Furthermore, K. I. D. Maslen (***Notes and Queries*** 225 [1980]: 525–27) has recently established a strong link between Macaulay's reflections on historiography and "The Bishop Orders His Tomb." A passage that Macaulay published in 1840 on the corruptions of the Renaissance Church, and that there is every reason to suppose Browning read before composing his poem, itemizes in fascinated detail the "sensual and intellectual voluptuousness" practiced by the clerical hierarchy: not only "delicious wines" and "lovely women," but the stuff of history in "newly-discovered manuscripts of the classics," "busts, mosaics, and gems just dug up from among the ruins" (***Essays***, p. 408). It could not be more fitting, either that this 1840 set-piece should occur in the course of a review of Leopold von Ranke (leading proponent of the new critical historiography), or that something in this particular phase of the topic should have transported Macaulay out of his brief to "surprise us by a gusto beyond the call of duty" (Maslen, p. 527). Macaulay's preter-ideological surplus, like that of Browning's excessive Bishop, betrays the fever of an historical curiosity from which the diagnostician too must suffer—a condition which, as the archaeologist J. H. Marsden would declare in his inaugural lectures at Cambridge in 1852, affects alike "the antiquary and the poet" (quoted in Levine, p. 90).