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### Unsettled Scores: Meter and Play in Two Music Poems by Browning

You are about to read – and to hear as well, if you like, on a visit to the *Critical Inquiry* website – a pretty shamelessly self-interested talk. I prepared it for two reasons. I wanted to get a more inwards understanding of a couple of Browning poems that have been favorites of mine for forty years. I also wanted to give a sort of extreme road-test to a mode of critical understanding, prosodic analysis, that has at least until quite recently forfeited not just its prestige but its very academic currency, within the study and the classroom alike. A welcome uptick of interest in versification is now perceptible among scholars on both sides of the Atlantic: witness the “Metre Matters” conference at Exeter in 2008, the like-titled book of selected proceedings that conference organizer Jason Hall published in 2011, and concurrently a dedicated issue of the journal *Victorian Poetry*, edited by Yisrael Levine and Meredith Martin, who for good measure brought out the next year her landmark contribution to the historically contextual study of prosodic theory and practice in the modern era.<sup>1</sup> Interventions like these are sorely needed, at a time when the once routine habit of incorporating the scansion of verse into literary pedagogy at the secondary or tertiary level has so withered that we are raising a generation of English majors – doctoral candidates, for that matter – who have only the shakiest access to the interior structures that sustain the great tradition in verse, and only the most impressionistic vocabulary for

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<sup>1</sup> *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011); Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012). The journal issue on “Victorian Prosody” includes an essay of mine, “Poetic Data and the News from Poems: A *For Better for Verse* Memoir,” *Victorian Poetry* 49.2 (2011), which concerns a scansion-tutorial website that I mustn’t neglect this opportunity of mentioning: <http://prosody.lib.virginia.edu>.

describing and debating what they manage to see and hear there. We who retain the prosodist's endangered skill-set have a duty nowadays to use it, or lose it. If in discharging this duty we can impart to others some of the powerful enjoyment that formal analysis, at its luckiest, promotes, then maybe the self-interest to which I have confessed can creditably sport the mask of virtue too.

What follows is a detail-indulgent serial close-reading of two musician monologues from Robert Browning's 1855 collection *Men and Women*: "A Toccata of Galuppi's" and "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha."<sup>2</sup> Before the plunge into details engrosses us, let me premise a guiding hypothesis and subjoin a few preliminary reflections to go with it. The hypothesis, suitable for testing on these two virtuoso poems rooted in musical performance, takes the form of a double analogy concerning issues that visible scansion and audible voicing jointly disclose: The meter of a poem is to its rhythm as a composed score is to its performance, and also as a text is to its interpretation, whether one takes *interpretation* in its hermeneutic, written sense or in the sense of an experienced vocalization – whether, that is, one takes it into the library or into the auditorium, the literate domain or the oral.

Now the practice of scansion, or prosodic textual markup, by its very nature participates in both these domains. As a visible notation of an imagined performative utterance, for which it serves concurrently as record and as guide, scansion both confesses and exposes that acoustic nostalgia which has inhabited the printed voice in its virtual orality ever since poems first fell from the air onto the page. Arguably since manuscript antiquity, and decidedly since the Renaissance inauguration of print, competent reading of verse has depended on a regular interplay between the visual and the aural mode (the latter nearly always entailing its homonym the oral mode) of verbal experience. Scansion is a highly artificial technique that engages all three modes, really, but the first two especially. We score words syllabically, corral those constituent syllables into a more or less arbitrary set of fixed feet, and then

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<sup>2</sup> I take as my text for both monologues Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), omitting the roman numerals that label each stanza in both poems.

read the internal relations of these arbitrarily educed constituents as data on which to undertake a structural analysis.

This metrical analysis would be (as in the beginning student's hands it so often is) intolerably rigid, were it not made constantly answerable to the voice and the ear – subtler organs, but by the same token wobblier ones. Our speaking and hearing are analogue processes to a fault, a fault whose correction, to swing back with the pendulum into scansion's visual aspect, lies with the digital binarism of the splayed and bundled verbal data-byte that is conned by the scanning eye. My web site *For Better for Verse* is quite content, as the technical armature of my remarks here will be quite content, to employ the gauges and terminology that traditional anglophone prosody borrowed centuries ago, God bless it, from the versification of classical antiquity. I freely concede that other, usually subtler, scansional metrics have been theorized, tested out on hundreds of lines of verse, and refined accordingly to a Ptolemaic niceness of distinction. The best known of these today, and probably the best too, is the system of graduated stresses, beats and offbeats proposed a generation ago by Derek Attridge.<sup>3</sup> Before him there flourished various adaptations of a fourfold accentual notation, discriminating primary from secondary degrees of syllabic stress and slack, that were developed during the 1950s on a basis laid down by the phonologists Trager and Smith.<sup>4</sup> And back in Browning's day, which witnessed the first

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London and New York: Longman, 1982). This learned, accessible, and resourceful study cannot be too much praised; and yet the scansional program it adopts in lieu of foot divisions – three strengths of *beat* and four sorts of *offbeat* for meter, each with its own alphabetic subscript symbol, supplemented ad libitum by four further superscripts marking *stress* -- does not stand up long to Ockham's razor. Nor does it survive into the author's later textbook *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), which adapts a variant of superscript "single-line scansion" while stoutly maintaining the distinction between sounded *beat* and metered *stress* (pp. 64-5, 210-15).

<sup>4</sup> George L. Trager and Henry Lee Smith, Jr., *An Outline of English Structure* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), found a skilled prosodic exponent in Martin Halpern, "On the Two Chief Metrical Modes in English," *PMLA* 77 (1962) 177-86. Generative prosodist-linguists, whether or not they endorse binaries of stress or feet, tend to come in pairs: among those cogently surveyed in Attridge's chapter 2 (*Rhythms*, pp. 28-55) are Halle and Keyser (1966), Magnuson and Ryder (1970), Liberman and Prince (1977, prosodized that year by Paul Kiparsky). More recent overviews of this field of prosodic study occur in the opening chapters of Richard D. Cureton, *Rhythmic*

campaigns of recognizably modern prosody warfare, the classical metrics of long and short quantity left their Victorian mark in the isochronic theories of, among other notables, the poets Coventry Patmore (1857) and Sidney Lanier (1880), the latter so identifying stress with duration (though not, oddly, volume or pitch) that he imported musical notation wholesale, dotted quavers and all, into a self-described prosodic “science.”<sup>5</sup>

Such ghostlier methodical demarcations of keener verbal sounds, at least when I try to apply them at the blackboard or on homework, have yielded an equivocal result. While they are *descriptively* richer than the stiff old talk about anapestic trimeter and so forth, in *analytic* terms their yield is more blurred. They concede too much to the idiosyncrasy of the individual specimen, and defer too grudgingly to the authority of the defining type; they’re too susceptible, as it were, to that analogue acoustic nostalgia I was talking about. I prefer leaving subtlety to the performing voice – as *Critical Inquiry’s* hospitality to a multimedia experiment will permit me to do here – and letting analysis make its way with the stronger if more merely approximate abstractions of form which traditional scansion makes available. For, in truth, the whole prosodic enterprise is what Wallace Stevens in a different context called the exercise of an extremist in an abstraction; and there’s no getting around that.<sup>6</sup>

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*Phrasing in English Verse* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), and of Martin J. Duffell, *A New History of English Metre* (London: Legenda, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See the “Study of English Metrical Law” that Patmore adapted from an 1857 review essay and prefaced to *Amelia, Tamerton Church Tower, Etc.* (London: Bell, 1878); Lanier, *The Science of English Verse* (New York: Scribner, 1880). These and other quantitative “timers” are surveyed at relatively close hand by T. S. Omond in *English Metrists in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Tunbridge Wells: Pelton, 1903); and are, for our time, set in a wider historical context by Martin, who in *Rise and Fall* takes pains to show how in the Victorian and Edwardian prosody wars “the very definitions of ‘accent,’ ‘quantity,’ ‘stress,’ and ‘time’ in English verse were dynamic, malleable, and shifted in specificity and abstraction depending on the intended audience” (p. 95).

<sup>6</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction,” *PMLA* 74 (1959) 585-98, defend a classic syllable-stress prosody on one hand against the upstart Trager-Smith adopters, on the other against such latter-day isochronists as Northrop Frye: see his “Lexis and Melos,” in *Sound and Poetry: English Institute Essays 1956*, ed. Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. ix-xxvii. See also the eloquent defense of meter mounted by Simon Jarvis, “Prosody as Tradition,” *Dalhousie Review* 79 (1999) 151-72: “the bluntness of traditional metrical categories when considered as a measure, categories such as ‘iambic pentameter,’ is from one point of view hardly a disadvantage, because they are not really measurements at all.

Admittedly arbitrary Euclidean fixities like the iamb and caesura will get me and my students further, faster, than will a curvaceous Newtonian calculus of the living line.<sup>7</sup> The very rigidity of traditional prosody is a help, for it throws into firmer relief the seminal contrast between fixed, mechanical meter and flowing organic rhythm on which, as I play it, the whole game depends.<sup>8</sup>

And it's high time now for our opening gambit: "A Toccata of Galuppi's." Browning's title prepares its oral interpreter to brace for a tour de force: a classical toccata or touch-piece was written as an opportunity for keyboard show-offs to show off; to show, as the Italian name may propose, that they hadn't lost their touch. The ekphrasis, as it were, of an eighteenth-century keyboard piece overlooked or overheard from the vantage of a nineteenth-century sensibility for which our habits of listening to recorded sound lay decades in the future, our first poem implicitly places before its reader challenges of live performance. And for these challenges, be warned, Browning, who had a technical knowledge of

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Were they able to chart every least shading of rhythm, they would be incapable of serving the conventional and normative function of metrical abstraction" (p. 161).

<sup>7</sup> Implicit here is a second and subtler riposte to the prosodic dynamists' multiplication of categories: the very stiffness of the foot and, beneath it, the posited insistence of meter can generate eligible line-readings whose historically attenuated aptness or dramatic interest might otherwise be overlooked. This metrical heuristic – regularly employed in our time by working Shakespearean actors – is at risk if we yield too soon to Attridge's apparent good sense about all that a reader of Shakespeare really needs: "We are not invited to *read* these syllables in any special manner, or to experience a struggle between two levels, but to respond to the quickening of the rhythm in the first case and its slowing down in the second" (*Rhythms*, p. 15). Yes, but effects of *accelerando* and *ritardando* want, if not quite a metronome or speedometer, then something more to go by than just each other, some sterner "struggle," in fact, "between two levels." See Wimsatt and Beardsley: "A good dramatic reading is a much more delicate, difficult, and rewarding performance than a mere scanning. Yet the scanning has its justification, its use. We would argue that a good dramatic reading is possible only by a person who *can* also perform a scansion" (p. 596).

<sup>8</sup> The thriftiest citation I can adduce in support of binarist pragmatism in scansion is the fair-minded discussion of "ictus" in Seymour Chatman, *A Theory of Meter* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), pp. 119-20, which incorporates well-chosen testimonials from Lascelles Abercrombie, *Principles of English Prosody* (London: Secker, 1923) and from Wimsatt and Beardsley. The binarist case is reasserted for a new generation by the revised edition (with Robert McDowell) of Harvey Gross's 1964 *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); and by Robert Wallace's essay "Meter in English," which appears with responses by divers hands in *Meter in English: A Critical Engagement*, ed. David Baker (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

music quite rare among major authors, was not reluctant to contrive that the reader should encounter prosodic equivalents.<sup>9</sup>

Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!  
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;  
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

I hope you could feel me pressing the tempo forward despite impediments; and I hope, too, that the metric system of Browning's stanza came home to you in its full regularity. Texturally we have an invariant alternation of stressed with slack syllables, eight stresses to the line, always divided into two clumps of four by the marked mid-line pause, or caesura, that follows the eighth of each line's fifteen syllables. Because every line both begins and ends with a stress, it's a toss-up whether to scan the lines – subdivide them into metrical feet – as trochaic or iambic; that is, as running respectively dum-dee dum-dee dum-dee dum-dee, or dee-dum dee-dum dee-dum dee-dum; again, as falling from the strong initial stress of each line or as rising towards its equally strong terminal stress. This insistent but not terribly serious question is one that English verse often poses, and that it ordinarily settles in favor of the dee-dum or iamb, since as a rule stress-ended or rising feet predominate in English over falling or slack-ended feet.<sup>10</sup>

Here, though, in a first instance of the Venetian invasion of English proprieties that we shall find the entire poem performing at length, Browning has contrived to tilt the meter not iambically but

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<sup>9</sup> Penelope Gay, "Browning and Music," in *Writers and their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), judges that "no other literary Englishman of the century had such a thorough knowledge of the science," and that "he was a musical and not merely a sentimental amateur" whose peers in musicology were "the great Continental writers, from the Encyclopédie to Nietzsche" (pp. 211, 216).

<sup>10</sup> George Stewart's 1930 finding, in *The Technique of English Verse* (rptd Port Washington: Kennikat, 1966), pp. 35-49, that the decisive predominance in English of rising over falling phrases tips the scale in favor of "anacrusis and masculine ending" (p. 46) – i. e., of rising meter – has not been overturned.

trochaically. This he does in two ways that persist throughout the poem. First, that caesural pause between syllables 8 and 9, underscored here in stanza 1 every time by medial punctuation, always falls after a slack syllable. Even though there is nothing natural about such a break point, it soon becomes second nature within the unfolding poem, which so ingrains its expectation as to dictate, in effect, a dum-dee dum-dee trochaic meter for the whole.<sup>11</sup> This expectation is moreover reinforced at the end of every line, where strong punctuation enforces a second pause that, coming after the terminal stressed syllable, marks time for the terminal slack syllable that our line-long momentum has disposed us to await there. Think of it, in a slightly grisly association that the poem will reward, as the prosodic equivalent of an amputee's missing but still sensed limb: a ghost-foot, if you like, that fulfills in airy parenthesis Browning's showy trochaic octameter. Or think of each line, taking this one leaf from Sidney Lanier's book, in musical terms, as a measure that consists of fifteen sixteenth-notes terminating in a sixteenth-rest, which the reading voice more or less metronomically beats in silence, snatching a catch-breath, maybe, as opportunity offers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For reasons of analytic economy set forth at the opening of this essay, my trochaic scansion of the poem declines John E. Schwiebert's Trager-Smithian proffer of a "dipodic," dum-dee-DUM(-dee) meter, wherein each foot has two stresses, one primary one secondary, with regularly intervening slacks: "Meter, Form and Sound Patterning in Robert Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's,'" *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 15 (1987) 11-23. Schwiebert has worthy allies: Park Honan, "The Iron String in the Victorian Lyre: Browning's Lyric Versification," in *Browning's Mind and Art*, ed. Clarence Tracy (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), p. 93; Attridge, *Rhythms*, p. 118; Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 118. On my side I recruit left-handed support from Loy D. Martin, for whom a "four-beat dominant sur-metric pattern" is imposed on "a headless iambic of eight feet" in *Browning's Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 116; and from Duffell, who regards the poem as trochaic but, strangely, "laid out on the page with two tetrameters to the line" (p. 176); while staunch at my right hand stand two poets: John Hollander, citing "trochaic rhythm" in "Browning: The Music of Music" (1974), in *Robert Browning*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), p. 80; and none other than Browning himself, who declared to F. J. Furnivall that the meter was "purely Trochaic" (quoted in Hair, p. 118). Both sides concur, in any case, that either downbeated meter "is relatively inflexible and does not invite substitution" – and that Browning, invited or not, crashes the meter anyhow at rhythmically important points in the poem. Schwiebert's is the most thorough prosodic analysis of "tension between artificial form and natural speech" that this accomplished poem has received; he is indebted to Russell Astley's thoughtful essay, which has been too little followed up, "Browning's Logoedic Measures," *Victorian Poetry* 16 (1978) 357-68.

<sup>12</sup> This at least a pianist doesn't need to do, by the way, when working hard at Granville Bantock's 1934 instrumental setting of our poem, which is all sixteenths, all the time, in the right hand. Michael Allis, *British Music*

Here's how the pattern plays out in stanza 2:

What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,  
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

By now Browning has established his time signature firmly enough to let him omit punctuation at the caesural break mid-line, but I trust you heard it all the same. Did you hear besides how the third line of the stanza, unpunctuated though it is after "Doges," manages for a micro-pause to savor that richly exotic, slightly decadent word? One thing you surely observed is that I skipped this stanza's first line. That was done on purpose, and in order to single it out as a first illustration of what I mean by Browning's unsettling of the score:

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.

Not once in this line, but twice, the rhythm slues out of synch with the trochaic meter that nevertheless continues to govern the whole. Suppose for a second that Browning had written instead

Here you come with ancient music, here is all the good it brings.

Why not do it that way and toe the line that stanza 1 has clearly laid down for its successors to follow?

Why "Here you come with your **old music**, and **here's all** the good it brings"? This is a perfectly sensible question, one that spins in the same aesthetic-cognitive orbit with Tennyson's snarky comment that Browning might be first of the immortals if people should ever cease to care about poetic form, or with

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*and Literary Context: Artistic Connections in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. 148-51, reproduces Bantock's bars 11-14 and discusses the composer's several specific imitations of the poet's verbal cues about structural intervals. Bantock also set "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" for piano in *9 Dramatic Poems* (1935). Nachum Schoffman, *There Is No Truer Truth: The Musical Aspect of Browning's Poetry* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 115, speculatively sets Browning's first stanza to the running sixteenths that open the allegro second movement of Galuppi's Sonata-Toccata in F Major, which piece Schoffman nominates (pp. 101-23) as the actual piece to which the poem refers.



Oscar Wilde's merriment over Browning's transformation of verse into a prose medium, or with Ben Jonson's expostulation that Browning's admired John Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging.<sup>13</sup> This normalizing question is just the one I hope to accustom you to asking as you read Browning. Why does old Hippety-Hop-o'-the-accent, as Ezra Pound fondly dubbed him, tend to syncopate like a hip-hop rapper?<sup>14</sup> In the instance before us, why has Browning, if I may get technical on you again, substituted an iamb for a trochee twice within this rogue line, in the third and fifth feet? Suddenly there's resistance in the air; the speaker is stumbling at an impediment that remains conceptually invisible to us, though it's acoustically audible already, the more so as scansion makes it analytically prominent. To ask what that blank impediment may be opens a mystery for the prosodically oriented reader to solve in executing the poem as an entirety.

That hearing entrains seeing is the theme of Browning's next stanza, in which the English speaker's fantasy of old Venice floats up into imaginative view:

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call  
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:  
I was never out of England — it's as if I saw it all.

This vision of a marine city is, for our Englishman, marinated in poetic associations: Shakespearean first, through *The Merchant of Venice*, but for the Victorian reader – and that's who our speaker by now clearly is, a Victorian sight-reader of sheet music as closet drama – also inevitably Byronic. Byron's carnivalesque ottava-rima poetic from *Don Juan* and “Beppo: A Venetian Tale” winks at us around the

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<sup>13</sup> Late in life Browning wrote in a letter of 30 June 1887, “I have given much attention to music *proper* – I believe to the detriment of what people take for ‘music’ in poetry, when I had to consider that quality. For the first effect of appreciating real musicality was to make me abjure the sing-song which, in my early days, was taken for it”: quoted in Herbert Eveleth Greene, “Browning's Knowledge of Music,” *PMLA* 62 (1947) 1099.

<sup>14</sup> Pound, “Mesmerism,” in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1926), p. 13.

corner of the triple-A rhyme scheme Browning chose for his “Toccata.”<sup>15</sup> It’s there no less in the colloquialism this stanza struts. Notice how the poetical “ ’tis” of the first line declines to the prosaically unbuttoned “it’s” of the third; or how the deeply English idiom of whatchamacallit raises themes of naming and translation, even as the foreign name of that bridge our speaker can’t at the moment think of hovers in the air. That unspoken word remains instead on the tip of his tongue – or rather at the end of his lines, where “carnival” and “saw it all” play phonemic peekaboo, on the side, with the unspoken name “Rialto,” exotic yet familiar, in aural camouflage.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout this third stanza the rhythm behaves itself, in keeping with the speaker’s care to get things right and restrain his Venetian fantasy projection within proper bounds. Keeping the meter running, so to speak, lets him finance more risqué rhythmical luxuries in the two stanzas that follow:

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?  
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,  
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red, —  
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,  
O’er the breast’s superb abundance where a man might base his head?

Those “**young** people” at the start of stanza 4 will engross imagination for much of the rest of the poem, and they seize attention here with an iambic inversion in the first foot. The resultant rhythmical lingering underscores a semantic contrast with the first occurrence of the same effect back in stanza 2: “Here you come with your **old** music.” To anticipate my fuller argument, and the poem’s very last line of all: the correlation between the imaginary “young people,” and the “old music” whereby Galuppi

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<sup>15</sup> On the Venetian matrix see Stefan Hawlin, “A Note on ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’ and Thackeray’s ‘King Canute,’” *Victorian Poetry* 28 (1990) 147-50.

<sup>16</sup> Not just aphasia here but paramnesia, as it is not the bridge but the commercial district with which Shakespeare’s play (I.iii) associates Shylock: see Robert C. Schweik, “Art, Mortality, and the Drama of Subjective Response in ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s,’” *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987) 133.

conjures them up in the speaker's re-playing mind, unsettles time's ordinary forwardness, with the uncanny effect of visiting on the up-to-date Victorian time-traveler who speaks the poem a dose of ghostly shivers, a conviction that he, in his very modernity, has "grown old." In this connection, back up in stanza 4, it's a nice touch that the meridian hour "mid-day," at the end of its middle line, should be felt to teeter between trochaic and iambic orders, as a sort of low-level default spondee. The metrically enforced "**burning ever to mid-day**" won't quite do; it's resisted by an alternative reading, "**burning ever to mid-day**" (which an analogy to the uncontested earlier trochee "**midnight**" reinforces, but which won't quite do either, given the rule that a terminal rhyming syllable draws stress: hence the spondaic compromise **mid-day**). Again an impediment, voiced but inexplicit. The line *performs a reluctance*, much as we might suppose the carnival revellers balked at packing it in and calling it a . . . night. . . a morning? . . . an afternoon? . . . whatever, man.

You take my point, which becomes Browning's point in stanza 5 as he deals out a royal flush in hearts. Here the poem tempers youth's clock-time reluctance with what Milton had called, in celebrating the unfallen sexuality of Adam and Eve, a sweet reluctant amorous delay. I find just one outright metrical substitution in these lines, the spondee that buoys up this fancy lady's "small face" as nice as you please. Something subtler and more slithery, though, is on the premisses. I mean the threefold double-sibilation that cherishes the lady's more erogenous zones with an extra-metrical lingering-out, an effect that admirers of Garrett Stewart's remarkable studies of "phonotextual" overlap will be primed to appreciate: "cheeks so round" and "lips so red."<sup>17</sup> Rewrite in the singular, "cheek" for "cheeks" and "lip" for "lips," and you will hear how a proper reading of the line as Browning did write it obliges you to slow way down and smell the roses. But is there a snake in the grass here? My students would probably think so; but, myself, I want the heart to scold. There will be plenty of things to

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<sup>17</sup> Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); see especially chapter 4, "Graphonic Tension in English Poetry."

reprehend and regret in this poem, but I don't think a robust sex drive is among them. Just try out the third double-sibilance of the stanza, in its magnificent third line. If you liked "cheeks so round," you have to love "breast's superb abundance," where a third s whets the whistle for the way the swooping, palatalized-diphthong *u* of "superb" puckers the reading lip to kiss the labials-in-waiting down the line: "super**b** abundance," "Ma**n**," "Ba**s**e," each buss being timed, for good measure, with a regulation metrical stress.

From the dalliance of this erotic trance stanza 6 has to shake itself awake with one of those great colloquial "Well"s that are among Browning's glories in the modern verse tradition:

Well, and it was graceful of them — they'd break talk off and afford  
— She, to bite her mask's black velvet — he, to finger on his sword,  
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

No especially special effects here, after the foregoing extravaganza, but still let's appreciate what we can. "They'd break talk off" is nicely turned: the first two syllables are metrically predestinated a trochee, but the long-*a* assonance blazons them a spondee instead, while "talk," starting the regular next trochee, clicks into place with a terminal *k* that makes the break from *conversazione* into *toccata* all the crisper. (Does anybody else hear a preliminary recital-hall cough there in "talk off"?) These graces in the first line tune the ear for a like effect in the line that comes next. "Mask's" resumes the oral gratifications that were on offer up in stanza 5, in a kind of sibilant residue that holds its feminine own against the comparatively brute Freudian obviousness of that sword-fingering image it's coupled with. Meanwhile, "mask's black velvet" picks up the double-*k* effect of "break talk," in preparation for our title-word "Toccatas" in line 3 and then the clinching term "clavichord."<sup>18</sup> Scholarly annotators have rightly objected that a Venetian auditory wishing to hear an actual clavichord's music would have had to

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<sup>18</sup> Schwiebert acutely remarks on the answering closural effectiveness of the gutturals in "octave struck," once the music's over at the end of stanza 8.

be so quiet they could hear a pin drop, since it was with a mere pin-head that that delicate eo-piano tapped its strings.<sup>19</sup> Maybe listening for the percussive under-mechanism of *k*, or the dry-wet consonant pairing in “**played**,” “**stately**,” and “**clav-**,” offers readers a calisthenic mimesis of the sharpened attention that hushes the speaker’s imagined palazzo, as of the keyboard prestidigitation to which, we are here reminded, the speaker has committed himself from the first.

It is at all events to the hearing and interpretation of music that the poem itself redirects us most explicitly in stanzas 7 through 9:

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,  
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions — “Must we die?”  
Those commiserating sevenths — “Life might last! we can but try!”

“Were you happy?” — “Yes.” — “And are you still as happy?” — “Yes. And you?”  
— “Then, more kisses!” — “Did *I* stop them, when a million seemed so few?”  
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!  
“Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!  
I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!”

Even if you have no more music theory in your head than this ex-rock-and-roller and adult fumbler at the cello does, you can relish the skill with which Browning breaks to poetic measure the analytic terminology of a sister art. Value-neutral description of intervals along the “octave” or eight-note scale are first charged with affect: the third interval is not only minor, but “plaintive” about it; the finicky chromaticism of the diminished sixth gets verbally figured in a little string of four anemic short *is* (“sixths diminished”; five of them, really, if we enlist “plaintive” from the other side of the caesura). And then, of course, there’s that lollapalooza the “commiserating” seventh. These affect-laden analytic intervals

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<sup>19</sup> Schoffman, p. 95, marshals reasons and authorities affirming that Browning ought to have written “harpichord.”

are enlarged by the speaker's interpretation of them into tokens within an allegory of life-and-death, which is what for him, as will be seen, the drama of deferral-and-closure enacted by music's "suspensions" and "solutions" ultimately means. So determined is our speaker to "take [Galuppi's] meaning" (as the very first stanza has promised) that he imputes his hermeneutic imperative to the young lovers his imagination has been conjuring up.

Such imputation, by the way, is the oldest trick in Browning's dramatic playbook, his favorite way of making our readerly zeal to understand run interference for the believability of his frantically reading, nay over-reading speakers. Think of *Porphyria's Lover* (1842), or *Fra Lippo Lippi or Childe Roland* (1855), or *Caliban* (1864), and you'll know what I mean: all of them are more or less bewildered interpreters of something they are trying hard to understand, our sympathy with whom derives in large measure from the hermeneutic energy we invest in trying hard to understand *them*.<sup>20</sup> The result of this interpretive implantation is to repay the loan of our collaborative fellowship with Browning's characters back to us, with dramatic interest, as the illusion of their independent life. Here in "A Toccata of Galuppi's" the gambit trammels everybody involved in the age-old feedback loop of *carpe diem*. Music's drive towards the closural restoration of the *status quo ante*, which its every melodic detour into development nevertheless implies, incites an awareness of mortality, which then so intensifies the pressure on vivid living as to ignite life's candle at both ends and hasten the chilling yet thrilling velocity of demise. "Must we die?" "Then, more kisses!"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> W. Craig Turner, "Art, Artist, and Audience in 'A Toccata of Galuppi's,'" *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987) 123-29, observes "the ongoing process of imputation" whereby "the poet attributes meaning to the speaker who attributes meaning to the Venetians who are attributing meaning to Galuppi. We, of course, are on the ever-broadening end of the telescope imputing Browning" (p. 127).

<sup>21</sup> See Edgar F. Harden, "A New Reading of Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's,'" *Victorian Poetry* 11 (1973) 330-6: "the music makes evanescence seem potentially fulfilling by emphasizing the limits that make intensity possible. In this sense especially, the toccata is an overture to an earthly life that the fortunate listener can choose for himself" (p. 333), "an evocation of the fulfillment made possible by an acute but undaunted sense of defeat" (p. 336).

So it is that the numbers game of musical intervals from stanza 7 merges by stanza 8 into the dizzying arithmetic whereby Catullus, Jonson, Andrew Marvell and, a few pages earlier in *Men and Women*, the self-exciting Sicilian speaker of Browning's "Love Among the Ruins" have set about the project that a Browning disciple named Walter Pater would soon notoriously describe, in his "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (written 1868), as "expanding that interval" between the self and its death sentence, by cultivating the "fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness."<sup>22</sup> Do the math: to break the bank of pleasure, on a scale that regards "a million" kisses as erotic small potatoes, is what the stolen whispers of stanza 8 are all about; far from disrespecting Galuppi at his clavichord, these *sotto voce* interruptions constitute the *obbligato* of star pupils who have laid the lesson of the master to heart. And just here is where Browning flexes some mastery of his own, in prosodic foreplay. For the first line offers an effect that is unique within the entire poem. Just this once, the firmly established mid-line caesura disappears:

"Were you happy?" — "Yes." — "And are you still as happy?" — "Yes. And you?"

The line poignantly bridges past and present happiness like a miniature Rialto, temporarily securing the speaker's fantasy of a shared, ongoing bliss that he knows all the while can't last forever. Then, in the second line of this stanza, a willful imposition of italics disrupts the flow of trochees with an iamb. This is as strange a moment, prosodically speaking, as any in the poem, given that the same words, absent the italic, would make perfectly good sense read off as straight trochees: "Then more kisses, **did I stop** them, when a million seemed so few?"

Why violate this sensible metric with the wilful rhythmic substitution "Then more kisses, **did I stop** them?" What was Browning up to with his trochees when he, for his own part, "stopped them" just like that? I find it most helpful to look at this rhythmic roadblock in the rear-view mirror, after

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<sup>22</sup> Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 153.

we've passed it. For the next six and a half lines of stanzas 8 through 10 are utterly metrically regular. That typographically assertive "I" shapes up, in retrospect, as the hungry ego's last rally in the pursuit of happiness: "Did I stop them?" Rhythm, thwarting meter, lets the exposed "I" hover at the poem's very heart, in the middle of the middle line of the middle stanza (the eighth stanza, that is, of fifteen).<sup>23</sup> If the implicit question here is *Who, me?*, then the implicit answer is *Yes, you!*, an answer that will become uncannily explicit in the first line of stanza 12 below, "Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket." And indeed already in stanza 8 "the dominant's persistence," and the forces of finitude and curtailment whose dominance over human freedom it musically represents, will have their way.<sup>24</sup> "Hark!" cries the speaker, for all the world like a naïve theater-goer, in a remarkable apostrophe to, let us remind ourselves, the creatures of his own imagination. But they can't harken, they can't hear him; and anyway it would be too late even if they could. In this deeply melancholy poem of the overscored and overdetermined human condition, it's always too late.

That is what it means when the beat goes unperturbedly on across stanzas 9 and 10:

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!  
"Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!  
I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,  
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,  
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

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<sup>23</sup> The fractal symmetry glanced at here proves the tip of an analytic iceberg for David Parkinson, whose " 'A Toccata of Galuppi's': Even the Title's an Octave," *Browning Society Notes* 16.1 (1986) 2-11, is a minutely breathless critical rhapsody that shows Browning replicating the prosodic ratios of his fifteen-syllable line within those of his fifteen-stanza poem. Parkinson's recourse to the diatonic scale and especially the tritone is largely (by me at least) impenetrable, and his stress ascriptions are often bizarre; but his correlation of syllable-counts with syntactic-metric units (especially the structural tetrameter hemistich or "octave") sheds unique light on "what the poem is, and what it is actually about – namely the Music itself" (p. 11).

<sup>24</sup> Loy Martin, p. 119, remarks that the musical dominance of this line is prosodic as well, since it reinstates the regularity of meter temporarily resisted by the line that precedes it.



I have been laboring to little effect if you didn't catch unprompted the icy frisson that is packed by the spondee at the head of that last line. But did you get the extra dose of freon that 's on tap at the unpunctuated but still perceptible caesura point? Break the line in half where the trochaic template suggests, and you get "**Death stepped tacitly and took them,**" a clause that would seem to say it all, on analogy to the song late in Browning's nearly Venetian play *Pippa Passes* that ends, "Suddenly God took me" (4.192). But Browning has conferred on this speaker, unlike Pippa, the gloomy thoroughness of a scientific perseverance that needs to know, since Death took those pleasure-tripping Venetian night-owls, just where they went. Into the pagan slammer, that's where, down "where they never see the sun." Tripping on "pleasure," indeed: the word that, introducing the first caesura of this stanza, as earlier of stanza 4, arrives at a prosodic threshold, perched right there for the precarious taking.

Then, as if this weren't enough – and for our neurotically inquisitive speaker it *is* not enough – the restless itch to know drives ahead, past Galuppi's death sentence on ignorant youth, in quest of the heavy-minded meaning that the toccata harbors personally for him, the Victorian Englishman come home to roost, in stanza 11, from touring his own private Venice.

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,  
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,  
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro' every nerve.

This eleventh stanza takes us back to stanza 2, and in a sense to square one. "In you come with your **cold music**" recalls the phrasing, and exactly resumes the rhythm, of "Here you come with your **old music**." Only now the intrusive music has been at once updated, refrigerated, and driven, not out into the splendor and warmth of once upon a time back then, but inward, to riddle intellectual pride with matters which it would be better not to know, and whose mere apprehension sets the speaker's proud stance wobbling. His rhythm wobbles with it, here and in the ensuing stanza 12:

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:  
"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.

On the Gothic finger-pointing of the first of these lines I've poached already, so let me say here simply that with the spondee "**Yes, you**" our speaker desperately frames as Galuppi's fault what emerges with increasing force as his own immedicable conviction that in due time death will be fingering him too.

This evasive, projective recognition is staged in the person of Galuppi himself, and is beaten in by the strict trochaic meter that, with one noteworthy exception that I hereby deputize you to seize and place under arrest, governs the rest of this and the next two stanzas. Please take the force of this regularity, even as you listen for the one, significant substitution these lines contain. Enter, at last, stately at the clavichord, Baldassare Galuppi, the star of the show, whom I now follow Browning in quoting:

"Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.  
"The soul, doubtless, is immortal — where a soul can be discerned.

"Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,  
"Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;  
"Butterflies may dread extinction, — you'll not die, it cannot be!

"As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,  
"Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:  
"What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?"

At the bottom line, Browning's prosody serves as a staging-place for the dramatic contest between rules and exceptions; and the law that Galuppi's regularity lays down here is of a piece with those conclusions that the modern mind continued to draw across the nineteenth century, albeit to mounting panic, from the scientific premisses set forth by Enlightenment thought during Galuppi's century, the eighteenth.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The dialectic of regularity with irregularity informs Marc R. Plamondon's approach in "'What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?': A Musical Reading of Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' and 'Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha,'" *Victorian Poetry* 37 (1999) 309-31. Plamondon's interesting suggestion that the "dust and ashes" portion of the poem corresponds to an embedded fugue forming the second part of the toccata is not, happily, vitiated by

Physics, mathematics, and that dead giveaway geology all disclosed to the Victorian mind the uniformity of invariant processes that left no wiggle room for butterflies – or, indeed, for that which butterflies routinely symbolized in Victorian iconography, the immaterial soul. Which reminds me: Where, in those stanzas I just read out, do we find a rhythmic protest lodged against meter’s uniform regulation? It’s “The **soul**,” of course, which iambically turns the head of the final line of stanza 12. That irregularity registers the speaker’s devout hope that the soul, most pointedly *his* soul, enjoys immunity from the truth universally attested by everything in the natural world: ashes come to ashes, dust to dust. As goes that carnal theme-park Venice, so goes the world. Our speaker’s frail, exceptionalist defense of the soul’s immortality is itself all too mortal: a point that Browning’s prosody takes *en passant*, by contriving that each subsequent occurrence of the word “soul,” and there are three more of them in stanzas 12-14, shall dance obediently to the meter that, bearing down temporary objection, proves the rule of mortality. Meter is where death knocks.<sup>26</sup>

This little defeat or *petite mort* will carry us out of this accomplished poem through stanza 15, which recapitulates the pattern of insurrection and law-enforcement just discussed.

"Dust and ashes!" So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.  
Dear dead women, with such hair, too — what's become of all the gold  
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

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his impossible iambic scansion of such words as “Venice” and “people” (p. 315) and his postulation of (to my ear) inaudible “anapestic” substitutions (p. 317).

<sup>26</sup> As Warwick Slinn has it in *Browning and the Fictions of Identity* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1982), p. 73, “The poem records the epiphany wrought by the toccata, though it is an epiphany which is immersed in its own repetitiveness. It is a dispelling of illusion rather than a release into revelation.” Slinn primarily intends, as do I, repetition as a textural effect of the music; for Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 186, the poem executes a repetition in the entire structure of its argument: “the final grimness of Browning’s eerie poem is that its speaker is caught in a repetition. He will pause awhile, and then play a toccata of Galuppi’s again.”

Galuppi clinches his three-stanza case in a three-word slogan, “Dust and ashes,” whose invincible trochees drum up the speaker’s final, defeatist reaction. In the penultimate line he attempts a last stand, by turning aside from his own doomed self and yearning for a reprise of what had seemed so promising in the bravery of Venetian youth and beauty during the fantasizing first half of his reverie. “**Dear dead women, with such hair, too**” forms the slowest hemistich in all the poem: four feet, all right, but only one of them a trochee, in a sandbagging compilation of spondee and iamb that seems designed to sabotage the works and stop the clock. But of course that cannot be, for time will not relent, not for more than a *rallentando* it won’t. All that’s left to the speaker is nostalgia, which spills over here into that ghoulish fetishism about blondes that, if we may judge from “*Porphyria’s Lover*” and “*Gold Hair*” (1864), Robert Browning needed both to express from time to time and also to hold in check. The reaper speaks right through this last expedient, and in flat trochees to boot: “What’s become of all the gold / Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and **grown old**.” If there’s life in the old boy yet, it’s just life enough to lie down and die with the bitter pun of a homonymic “groan.” Musically speaking, it is too late in the day to read that assonantal double stress on the final two words, “grown old,” as anything but resignation, a retard written into Browning’s virtuoso touch-piece as the *toccata’s* kiss of death.

I have tried to show how “*A Toccata of Galuppi’s*” offers a study in human time, one that plots the whetting and frustration of desire along three coordinates. At a thematic level of sheerly imaginative reference the speaker, tapping the rejuvenating energies of erotic attraction as they play through glance and pulse and whisper, hears in these things at last instead the insistent tempo of old mortality. This is the stuff of John Keats, or as another lyric from *Men and Women* put it – “*Popularity*,” line 65 – it’s Keats’s disenchanted “porridge”; in interpoetic terms, the text that Browning’s embittering

touch-and-go with happiness has squarely in mind must be the “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”<sup>27</sup> The chastened Keatsian discovery of meaning is sponsored, along a second coordinate, by the toccata itself, to which the speaker refers in some analytic detail, and which I have supposed he is playing at the keys as he speaks.<sup>28</sup> My supposition is grounded in the poem’s running analogy between the showy difficulty of Galuppi’s music and the showy difficulty of Browning’s trochaic-octameter versification. This third and last coordinate is the only one we readers can actually see on the page, hear in the air, and feel in person – for scansional analysis is always a sound and light show, and to its mixed-media combination of hearing with seeing we owe most of the exquisite feeling that poetry *qua* poetry has to offer. For the prosodic coordinate is the one that supplies the key for extrapolating the two others, hidden and muted though they be. How much we can imaginatively infer about these from the formal properties of the verse has furnished the burden of my remarks.

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I turn now to a poem, also drawn from *Men and Women*, that is as comically goofy as our first poem was elegiacally grave, that accordingly carries a quite different tune, yet carries it on a comparable chassis of prosodic form. With “Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha” I again hope to demonstrate that the key to the music in the poem is neither more nor less than . . . the music in the poem. In other words, our access to the music obsessing Browning’s speaker lies through the music that, in verse’s most intimate way, the poem *is*. What the benighted organist who speaks this dramatic monologue has to say about the sheet-music fugue he is picking out on the keys up in a deserted church loft – be it analytically descriptive or, as he himself would prefer, interpretively meaningful – all this *makes sense* to us through what is sensuously delivered in form by the poet’s art.

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<sup>27</sup> See Stefan Hawlin, “Browning’s ‘A Toccata of Galuppi’s’: How Venice Once Was Dear,” *Review of English Studies* ns 41 (1990) 496-7.

<sup>28</sup> Harden (“New Reading,” p. 334n7) assumes “that the speaker’s playing of the toccata coincides with Galuppi’s imagined playing, which concludes in line twenty-five.”

Significant form becomes manifest in “Master Hugues” at two distinct and interlocking levels: the rhymed stanza and the metered line. At this point we can all probably use a rest from the latter, so let’s take up Browning’s stanza first. “Master Hugues” works from a three-beat base that, after two lines, lengthens to four beats for two more lines, and then contracts in the final line to three again. The way that fifth-line ritornello curls the stanza back into itself is enhanced by a rhyme scheme, *ababa*, that makes of each stanza a sonar loop homing in at the close on its origin. If for you this stanzaic manual savors too much of the shop, don’t worry: just test-drive the first couple of stanzas with me, and you’ll get the hang of it at once. Prick up your ears to hear stanzas, now, rather than lines:

Hist, but a word, fair and soft!  
Forth and be judged, Master Hugues!  
Answer the question I’ve put you so oft:  
What do you mean by your mountainous fugues?  
See, we’re alone in the loft,---

I, the poor organist here,  
Hugues, the composer of note,  
Dead though, and done with, this many a year:  
Let’s have a colloquy, something to quote,  
Make the world prick up its ear!

Around the compass or clock face we go – N, E, S, W, and back to N; 12 o’clock, 3, 6, 9, and back to 12 – five modular points, four changes executed among them, the final change rewinding to the *status quo*.<sup>29</sup> I trust you heard that, and I bet you’ve understood besides that the way Browning’s stanzas come about executes in miniature the canon or fugue form that line 4 identifies, that stanza 17 will later call the *rota*

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<sup>29</sup> On the cinquainery at play here Margaret Walker Dilling makes further ingenious observations, dividing the poem into five serial parts, and remarking how in stanzas 19, 20, and 24 Browning clumps pentads of, respectively, gerunds, verbs, and nouns: “Robert Browning’s ‘Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha,’ ” *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 1.2 (1973) 39. Likewise the poem’s most hectically congenial interpreter, Joseph A. Dupras in “ ‘Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha’: Robert Browning’s Organ for Light Denied,” *Browning Society Notes* 31 (2006) 7-21, posits thematic and motivic linkages between like-numbered stanzas from different developmental sections (e. g. 1, 11, 21), “producing in us the sensation of reprising or covering the organist’s interpretation” as we make our way through the text (p. 10).

or wheel, that stanzas 4 and 5 allude to as a “round,” and that most of us where I come from associate with three blind mice, white coral bells, and Frère Jacques.<sup>30</sup> I wonder, though, if in our transit of stanzas 1 and 2 you didn’t also hear something else, something slightly off-kilter that, by resisting this rounded fugal symmetry, enlivens it. For, in between the identically stressed and rhymed lines 1 and 5 that frame the stanzaic outside, Browning has introduced a structural asymmetry between the patterns of stress and of rhyme that correlate lines 2, 3, and 4; none of the inner lines has the same measured length as any line it rhymes with. The subtle effect is of a renewable forward thrust that cantilevers the four-beat lines 3 and 4 out over their three-beat prompt or support – only to have that forwardness tucked back in by line 5. Like the whole of “Master Hugues” in several other respects, the stanzaic structure strains at its own leash, keeps getting ahead of itself and reining itself in. You can see the same sort of thing happen at larger scale when the end of stanza 1 poaches on the business of stanza 2, in a lassoing lunge of syntax and thought that transgresses the formal stanzaic pattern, even at the very moment when Browning is first establishing it.

Read as eagerness or impatience, it’s the very keynote of this delightfully zany poem, and it reverberates, not only in the relation of lines within the stanza, but also in the relation of syllables within the line. That is to say, it reverberates in the metrics, which are a bit harder to describe analytically than those in “A Toccata of Galuppi’s,” but fortunately are if anything easier to *feel*. I verged on this topic already when enlisting the three-stress and four-stress lines that pattern Browning’s stanza. I avoided talking about feet, though, in deference to your sensibilities (and, if you insist, to Derek Attridge’s), and also because I find the true meter in “Master Hugues” impossible to call with authority. Let me lay my cards on the table and say I hear the poem as anapestic overall – its five-line stanza running trimeter,

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<sup>30</sup> Schoffman, p. 132, is rather severe on W. S. Johnson -- “Browning’s Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22 [1963-64] 205 -- and others like him who have sought out structural parallels between Browning’s stanzaic and Hugues’s fugal form. Admittedly the parallel can never be tight, but there is no denying that the stanza’s mix of propulsion and recursion, drive and design, creditably imitates large-scale fugue effects.

trimeter, tetrameter, tetrameter, trimeter – nearly always with a trochee in first position and an iamb in second. I like that scansion for its tidy bookkeeping, but I'll have nothing to trump you with if you prefer instead a scansion in straight anapests, with an acephalous or slack-less first foot. If you hear a ghostly double-slack at the head of each line and like to live in a haunted house, you're welcome to it. You and I may have to band together, however, if somebody else objects that the poem is not anapestic at all, but dactylic, as it unquestionably is if you hear the ghost slacks knocking around at the end of the line instead of the beginning. We anapesters deal from strength in the opening stanzas, but watch out: as the poem advances it addicts itself to feminine endings that weaken our hand, and by stanza 16, with Hugues's five fugal voices at critical mass, we are in hot water:

One is incisive, corrosive:

Two retorts, nettled, curt, crepitant;  
Three makes rejoinder, expansive, explosive;  
Four overbears them all, strident and strepitant,  
Five ... O Danaides, O Sieve!

What's that you say, these mid-fugue lines galloping out of context confuse you? It's Browning: what did you expect? All I am asking is that you hear how the *a*-rhymed feminine endings and the *b*-rhymed *double* feminine endings tend towards the dactyl; how the latter in fact fulfill a dactylic pattern perfectly. This stanza's fourth line, I pray you'll also note, virtually thematizes the stampeding precipitancy that dactylic meter tends in English to arrogate to itself: "**Four ov | er bears | them all**" sounds like the pattern these words would fall into conversationally – two iambs preceded by a trochee or maybe a spondee – but by this point in this poem they can't stand up to the strident stride of Browning's gallop, be it dactylic ("**Four over | bears them all, | strident and | strepitant**") or, as I stubbornly prefer, anapestic ("**Four | overbears | them all, strid | ent and strepitant**").



On that note: listen. I'll grant you a hung jury as to the specific meter of "Master Hugues," if you'll grant me that the poem sports a frisky triple meter of one kind or the other, which keeps things hopping, which rapidly grows on you, and which moreover grows on itself, taking on those extra line-ending syllables in formal obedience to that same push for growth which we began by identifying as a feature within the fixed yet internally restless stanza. Triple meters in English, as we just saw, are much bossier than duple meters; the momentum of anapests (or, as you may stubbornly prefer, dactyls) overrides a lot more tyrannically than do iambs or trochees those expressive push-backs on the part of speech-inflected rhythm that constitute much of the interest of Browning's "Toccatà." As Harlan Hatcher put it, in the 1928 monograph that remains, alas, the nearest thing we possess eighty years later to a standard book-length text on Browning's versification, "Master Hugues" evinces an "aggression which imposes upon obstreperous words a metrical pattern. The metre will break down on the reader who cannot stamp his foot," and "if the reader does not get the rhythm" – Hatcher, by the way, is a dactylist – "beating strongly in his ear before he gives attention to the words, he is likely to have a fall before he gets far." This means that I won't be pausing with you in what follows to savor the sorts of exquisite dubiety, self-deception and self-correction that enrich the involuted psychology of Galuppi's entranced, reluctant musical interlocutor. No: the organist we confront in this monologue is a far simpler soul, far from sure that he has taken Hugues' baroque "meaning," or even that the intricate, fugacious music before him has any such meaning to deliver in the first place. The man who in stanza 1 hales Hugues into hermeneutic court by asking "What do you mean?" must again query his "intent" in stanza 10, and he is still looking in stanza 18 for "the import." Immediately thereafter he does launch into an interpretive hypothesis, one that will reward our attention; but first we should recognize how the organist's baffled recurrence to the question of meaning recapitulates thematically the formal leaps from, and relapses to, square one that Browning has built into the poetic structure.

We should recognize, furthermore, how the triple-footed drive of meter absorbs into itself those idiosyncratic resistances and pauses-to-reflect which were positively solicited by the duple-footed trot of the monologue we looked at first. Take the handy contrast that stanza 11 from “Master Hugues” offers to something we teased out at the midpoint of “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”: the italicized pronoun “I”. ““Then, more kisses.’ ‘Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?’” There, the come-hither question “Did I stop them?” put a momentary hitch in the meter, which uncontroverted ought to have dictated the reading “**Did I stop** them?”<sup>31</sup> But here in “Master Hugues,” stanza 11, the italic is nearly superfluous, since what it insists on is merely strict conformity to the heedless, headless anapestic tetrameter: “I | believe in | you but **that’s** | not **enough**.” Presumably Browning imposed the italic, not for the sake of the monologist’s “I” – in whom we find one of the poet’s simpler, or simply rambunctious, souls – but rather for the sake of little “in” further down the poetic line, which requires a strong measure if it is to be promoted, as indeed it here should be, above the normally stress-engrossing verb that precedes it. Human nature, unprompted, might well make this tetrameter into something like “I **believe** | in **you**, | but that’s **not** | **enough**,” two anapest-iamb pairs. Yet such a reading is simply impossible: it not only makes hash of the by now steamed-up meter, it also injects a tone of humane tenderness that has no place in the obsessive impetuosity that governs at once this speaker’s affect and the verse medium which, quite like the finger-taxing, complicated, relentlessly logical fugue score he must play, constrains his every move.

Or take, for another example of higher magnitude, stanza 14 further along:

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<sup>31</sup> Hatcher, *The Versification of Robert Browning* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1928), pp. 28, 166. Amazingly, Hatcher deems the established rhythm of “A Toccata,” like that of “Master Hugues,” to be “strong enough to reduce all the lines to its pattern, rather joyfully sweeping through such stanzas” even as the one to which we revert here, the eighth, italics notwithstanding (p. 182). For a critical sample of how Hatcher’s assumptions have been overturned by subsequent prosodists, see Astley, “Browning’s Logoaedic Measures,” p. 358.

One dissertates, he is candid;  
Two must discept,--has distinguished;  
Three helps the couple, if ever yet man did;  
Four protests; Five makes a dart at the thing wished:  
Back to One, goes the case bandied.

Thus the poem in manic full career. A competent prose enunciation of these phrases would inflect matters quite differently: “One **d**issertates, he is candid; Two must discept,--has distinguished; Three **h**elps the couple, if ever **y**et **m**an **d**id; Four **p**rotests; Five makes a dart at the **t**hing **w**ished: back to **O**ne, goes the **c**ase **b**andied.” That not one of these bolded syllables does take stress in the lines as Browning scored them makes my point again: the very meter of “Master Hugues” stifles vocal idiosyncrasy, just as the surplus life force that might feed and cultivate a distinctive personality is all usurped by the mere extremity of an effort to keep up, athletically, with whatever’s coming around the next page-turn. No wonder at the end of stanza 14 “the case” gets bandied back to “One” all over again: our speaker can hardly make progress when it takes everything he’s got to run in place and not fall behind.<sup>32</sup>

To lack personality is not to lack character. And a *character* is just what I think Browning’s organist proves to be: a piece of work, a number, a hot sketch. Such is his sheer *vivacità*, his *allegresse*, his *presto* digitation, that the nearest analogues I can suggest for his sort of animation are to be found among animated cartoons. The stanzas of this poem, peopled by figments named One, Two, and so forth who seem to come straight out of Dr. Seuss, are like nothing so much as the hectically escalating episodes in a Bugs Bunny or Road Runner short. Get a load of stanza 17:

Now, they ply axes and crowbars;  
Now, they prick pins at a tissue  
Fine as a skein of the casuist Escobar’s

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<sup>32</sup> Attridge, *Rhythms*, makes of stanza 9 an excellent example of how a “vigorously insistent” meter can “create a high degree of tension and sense of great energy,” as the verse “invites by its content and syntax a reading with strong speech rhythms that repeatedly crush the metre only to have it spring back into shape again. . . . The metrical rules are not broken, merely stretched to the limit by the linguistic substance” (pp. 200-1).

Worked on the bone of a lie. To what issue?  
Where is our gain at the Two-bars?

The “Two-Bars,” indeed. “Escobar’s,” forsooth. The Loony Tune rhymes that Browning finds for those ridiculous Wile E. Coyote “crowbars” from the first line are poetic contents summoned into existence by nothing but the exigencies of poetic form; and all that keeps them from floating off the page into Toon Town or Neverland is a compensating earnestness worthy of Elmer Fudd at his spluttering funniest. As the man insistently queries, “To what issue?” What issue but the one every double bar harbors at the end of a musical development section, namely, doubling back to the beginning for one more whack at it, with gusto?

Just this is the juncture in the poem where the organist, tired of spinning his wheels to no “issue,” makes his most endearingly creative move. He does exactly what I encourage students to do when their interpretation arrives at an impasse: stop wringing your hands over the broken road, I tell them, and make a study of the impasse instead. Getting nowhere fast in his quest to find the meaning of Master Hugues’ mountainous fugues, the organist draws fresh inspiration around stanza 19 from his repeated encounter with the inaccessibility of that meaning. Never mind that the meaning of music fails to appear; what might that very failure turn out to mean? What if, when artistic content gets obscured by artistic form – thrust into the foreground as the loops and snares of self-generating fugal pattern – what if that absorbing, distracting intricacy were itself to emerge as music’s meaning? Stanzas 19 and 20 pose just this question:

What with affirming, denying,  
Holding, risposting, subjoining,  
All’s like ... it’s like ... for an instance I’m trying ...  
There! See our roof, its gilt moulding and groining  
Under those spider-webs lying!

So your fugue broadens and thickens,  
Greatens and deepens and lengthens,

Till we exclaim---`But where's *music*, the dickens?"

You know by now how I think we should answer that last question: the *music* is where the dickens the music is. To see as much is to reframe the insoluble hermeneutic question of musical meaning and kick it upstairs, as the organist goes on to do in stanzas 22-23:

Is it your moral of Life?  
Such a web, simple and subtle,  
Weave we on earth here in impotent strife,  
Backward and forward each throwing his shuttle,  
Death ending all with a knife?

Over our heads truth and nature---  
Still our life's zigzags and dodges,  
Ins and outs, weaving a new legislature---  
God's gold just shining its last where that lodges,  
Palled beneath man's usurpature.

As the image of "a new legislature" may hint, this "instance" hidden way up on the church groining is pure Shelley – it's the "radiance of Eternity" from *Adonais*, stained as always to human apprehension by the prismatic complexion, and complexity, of capital-L "Life" itself, with its dome of many colors. Here Browning plays once again, in "Master Hugues," his favorite Victorian game of down-shifting Romantic transcendentalism by hiding the master's tropes in all the strangest places. When Pater declared, "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*," that was because for him all music aspired to the condition of pure form where beauty was truth, truth beauty, and art might subsist for art's own sake.<sup>33</sup>

As a matter of Victorian intellectual history, that Aestheticist ideal of Pater's owed a huge debt to Browning. And yet Browning himself was never a full subscriber to it. He was perhaps too good a Christian to live with such a simplification; he was certainly too thorough-going a dialectician. His art

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<sup>33</sup> Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 86 ("The School of Giorgione").

always preferred to be “Backward and forward. . . throwing his shuttle” in the webs of textuality.<sup>34</sup> The grotesque, cartoonish frustration of the organist is but the reverse of that sublime aspiration beyond mere art which it was Browning’s mission to convey across the nineteenth century, albeit in fragments and in code, for safe keeping. It’s the aspiration that his art cherishes, nowhere more than in the art he committed to art, his much-regarded poems on painting and sculpture, and also the less-studied poems on music we are examining today. *Art for art’s sake* struck Browning as too glib a slogan. His program was rather *Art for life’s sake, Form for aspiration’s sake, The letter’s sake for that of the spirit*: yet always, and ever for those very sakes, Browning insisted on the art, the form, the letter.

In defense and illustration of that program, I submit the final two strophes of “Master Hugues,” where the organist, at the end of his tether, opts for simplicity against complexity, a choice that draws down the revenge of that stronger, less compromising art which was Browning’s:

Hugues! I advise *meâ pœnâ*  
 (Counterpoint glares like a Gorgon)  
 Bid One, Two, Three, Four, Five, clear the arena!  
 Say the word, straight I unstop the full-organ,  
 Blare out the *mode Palestrina*.

While in the roof, if I'm right there,  
 ... Lo you, the wick in the socket!  
 Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there!  
 Down it dips, gone like a rocket.  
 What, you want, do you, to come unawares,  
 Sweeping the church up for first morning-prayers,  
 And find a poor devil has ended his cares  
 At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs?

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<sup>34</sup> Browning characteristically remarked “that he had no allegorical intent in his head when he wrote the poem; that it was composed in an organ loft and was merely the expression of a fugue – the construction of which he understood, he said, because he had composed fugues himself: it was an involved labyrinth of entanglement *leading to nothing*.” This instructive comment, quoted in the *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins* (New York: John Lane, 1912), p. 79, still needs dialectical completion by line 118 of the poem itself: “Nothings grow something.”

Do I carry the moon in my pocket?

Call me a shallow trifler, but I love these lines as well as anything Browning ever wrote. With that jaunty belligerence which sets him apart in temperament from the run of his contemporaries – his unquenchable spark of assurance that the same shortfall between ideals and realities which sobered other Victorians into melancholy was not just funny but ultimately a blessing in which humankind should rejoice – Browning sets his speaker up at the last minute for a fortunate fall. Enough of this fuguing music, exclaims the exasperated organist, let's have a nice choral song we can hum and tap our feet to, massed into the block harmonies of the mode that Palestrina preferred. But he advances this proposal *meâ pœnâ* – or, as we might put it, under correction, dimly aware that the advantages of simplicity, tempting though they be, entail some corresponding *poena* or penalty.

Sure enough, this penalty gets meted out in Browning's pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, dunce-capstone final super-stanza. When you contrive a shortcut to eternity, you imperil your grip on the only world we have. When you take a broom to the cobwebs of mediation and go straight for the gold in the dome, the portion of light that's been vouchsafed to you may go out altogether. Gaze on that white radiance and you'll go blind. Ask Browning's Sordello (1840), stymied at the expressive threshold of an inexpressible poetic totality; ask Browning's Thamuris (1875), cruising for a bruising from the Muses who, not amused, will confiscate everything he's got; ask Browning's Andrea del Sarto (1855) about reach and grasp. Or ask the organist in our final stanza. If he *were* "right there," up in the roof of a heavenly now or a realized metaphysics, all might be different; but in fact he's not right there but *right here* – and the deictic word *here* has been an important one for both of our dramatic monologues – he's alone in the loft, someplace between floor and dome, earth and heaven, which is the very mid-way niche where art may prosper by keeping its senses and knowing its place, knowing it, Childe Roland-like, for the first time, as a place of strictly limited privilege. It is a place whose privilege consists in

transforming the brute limitations of human existence – the sounds a voice and mouth can utter, the pitches an ear can hear – into media for declaring human limitation to itself.

Pitching definitively into limitation is the formal business of the stanza before us, which starts like its 28 predecessors with the *aba* pattern of two trimeters and a tetrameter, only to leap suddenly, at the candle's sudden extinction, to the *b*-rhyming trimeter "**Down** | it dips, **gone** | like a **rocket**," an anomaly within the poem to this point and a portent of new departures just ahead. The next four lines hammer away at a fresh *c* rhyme in unrelenting tetrameters that translate into grouchy defensive vituperation what feels like a touch of panic. For it's only now that the organist awakens to where he really is, alone in the loft, perched darkling at a point of risky, incumbent, and dependent, superiority. At the same time, this unprecedented recurrence of monotone meter and rhyme signals a last-minute flourish within the fugal pattern that the verse's music continues to represent: this poem's closural equivalent, if you will, for what "A Toccata" called "the dominant's persistence, till it must be answered to" by the tonic. Both the speaker's will-to-live and the music's need-to-end come together in the prosodic train-wreck of the poem's great penultimate line: "At the **foot** | of your **rot** | ten-runged **rat-** | riddled **stairs**." By sheer syllable count this last line is the only fully articulated anapestic tetrameter of the poem, but it's almost impossible to read its twelve syllables out trippingly on the tongue, *à la* "Twas the Night before Christmas." *Tripping*, of course, is exactly what's on the speaker's vertiginously anxious mind, and a Saxon-angled *Verstiegenheit* may well explain why he piles up stresses in the last couple of feet, as if to fortify his own feet and cushion the fall he so vividly imagines. If anapestic triple meters tend, as I said earlier, to iron out the tones of affective expression, this line shows how strong measures like really entrenched alliteration may counteract that tendency nevertheless.<sup>35</sup> The slow consonant *r*, always half a vowel even in English, labors to retard the syllables, visiting in the process,

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<sup>35</sup> Browning achieved the full-strength effect in revision: the stairs in 1855 were "rotten-planked."



perhaps, a little retroactive vengeance on the intemperate high hopes of the stanza's first line: "While in the roof, if I'm right there."

Yet, in another sense, that first line harbors the secret of our speaker's salvation, as it transpires within the economy of Browning's art. That "if" of the organist's marks a saving grace, for it frames his impatient reach to compass all the truth as, in truth, not *the* truth of the matter but *an* hypothesis, a possibility entertained. To its imaginative upward thrust corresponds the counter-hypothesis he barks out at the sacristan in a torrent of rhetorical interrogation. Surely the poor caretaker does not want to stumble on a corpse at the bottom of the stairs tomorrow morning; so the organist's questions are rhetorical. And, if the organist had nothing more on his mind than mere creature-comfort after a scare – or if Browning were content merely to bring his lofty musician down a peg to affirm human fallibility – then the prosodically eloquent "foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs" would make a fair downscale closure to the piece, and the poem would be over right here. It turns out, though, that the phrase is not a conclusion, just a fermata. The fugal wheel wants to go home once again and reprise its theme; the poem wants to address the business its own music has left unfinished. So it is that a long-delayed, perfectly anapestic, *b*-rhyming trimeter sneaks in after all, under the wire, to insert a question of a different color from the mountainous one that has preceded it: "Do I **car** | ry the **moon** | in my **pocket**?"

Is this line a rhetorical question, or a genuine one?<sup>36</sup> Read rhetorically, the question solicits the obvious and literal answer "No, I sure as hell don't carry the moon in my pocket, which is why I'm holding on up here for dear life awaiting the sacristan's lantern." But the silence that pools at the end of so noisy a poem, its unscored but implied rest, can be a rich nutrient medium for afterthoughts; and in it we may attend to the allusion Browning has made, in closing, to a speech from the middle of

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<sup>36</sup> As Bloom observes, this poem, "like so many of Browning's poems, ends in an *aporia*, in the reader's uncertainty as to whether he is to read literally or figuratively" (*Poetry and Repression*, p. 181).

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, where the bumptious braggart Cloten denies the right of Rome to tax the insurgent Britons, and does so with another hypothetical *if*: "If Caesar can hide the sun from us with a blanket or put the moon in his pocket, we will pay him tribute for light" (3.1.41-43). Since Caesar doesn't have the moon in his pocket, Cloten reasons, it would be wrong to render unto Caesar tribute for that which is not his. Well and good; but where does this leave our darkling chastened organist, suspended as he is in the human condition, hung-up halfway between the dome and the pavement, the gold and the dust? Truth's golden sun exceeds his grasp, but then what of the silvery lunar gleam within him that, reflecting on the inaccessible Shelleyan source of light, reflects that source unawares? That godlike inner light, shall we call it imagination?<sup>37</sup> Yes, let's; as the whirligig of time's revenges whirls Browning into his tricentenary, that's the way to eat his birthday cake and have it too.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Langbaum thinks so, in *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 145: "A superb question, for of course the organist does carry his own light with him. The sculptured saints and the music have come alive in the moonlight of his imagination." Dupras, "Master Hugues," puts the same point more drily: "The organist, truly 'alone in the loft' (5), has to find 'something' (in himself" (p. 12).